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* Based on the combined experiences of F. B. Englehardt, Chattanooga, Tenn.; A. C. Wickham, Norton, Va. Dak.; L. Van Reuten, Grand Rapids, Mich., and many others.



Caught in a Rut

I wonder I put up with it as long as I did! Every day was filled with nothing but deadly routine and monotonous detail. No freedom or independence. No chance to get out and meet people, travel, and have interesting experiences. I was just like a rat in a big machine with poor prospects of ever being anything more.



Long, Tiresome Hours

Every hour of the day I was under someone's supervision. The TIME-CLOCK constantly had to wait for me—a clock-watcher, punching in and dying an inch. I was always a day prospect on the dot. It barred the direst challenge of my self-respect, reminding me how much poorer I was and how futile I really COULD be in the business and social world.



Low Pay

Paid just enough to keep going—but never enough to enjoy any of the GOOD things of life every man DESERVES for his family and himself. Always economizing and planning ahead. Always wondering what I would do if I were laid off or lost my job. Always uncertain and apprehensive of the future.



Desperate

Happened to get a look at the payroll one day and was astonished to see what big figures went to the sales force. Found that salesmen drawers made $200 a week—and sometimes $300! Would have given my right arm to make money like that, but never dreamed I had any "pull" for salesmanship.



A Ray of Light

Stumbled across an article in connection with a magazine that evening. It so surprised to discover that prominent men made such good "boss," as I had foolishly believed. Read about a former stenographer in the State of California, making $100 a week after learning the fundamentals of executive salesmanship. Decided that if HE could do it, so could I!



The Turning Point

My first step was to write for a certain little book which a famous business genius has called "The MOST AMAZING BOOK EVER PRINTED." It wasn't a fairy tale book, but it certainly opened my eyes to things I had never dreamed of—and proved the turning point of my entire career!

What I Discovered



Before the finish of the remarkable revelations I discovered hundreds of things I should have had and enjoyed that revealed the REAL TRUTH about the science of selling. It was a big job I had imagined. I learned that it was governed by simple rules and laws that almost ANY man can master or easily as he learned the alphabet. I even learned how to go about getting into that highest field of all—salesmanship. I found out exactly how Mark Shorkley of San Francisco was enabled to earn his $6 a week job as a mere cash-grabber and start leading $1,000 a week as a salesman, and how C. W. Bennington of Denver, Colo., jumped from $35 a week to $7,000 a year—three and hundreds of others. It certainly was a revelation!



FREE Employment Service

Furthermore, I discovered that the National Salesmen's Training Association, which published this book, also operates a most effective employment service. Last year they received requests from all over the U. S. and Canada for thousands of salesmen, and hired salesmen trained by their method. This service is FREE to both members and employers, and thousands have secured positions this way.



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Was It Worth It?

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That an intelligent censorship guards their advertising pages.

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VOL. VII, No. 3 — SEPTEMBER, 1931

CONTENTS

THE COPPER-CLAD WORLD — HARL VINCENT — 296
Blaine Comes Out of the Hypnosis of the Pink Gas to Find Himself Deep Within Io, the Copper Clad Second Satellite of Jupiter [A Complete Novelette]

DEVIL CRYSTALS OF ARRET — HAL K. WELLS — 344
Facing a Six-Hour Deadline of Death, Young Larry Rands a Hostile World of Rat-Men and Trebling Devil Crystals.

BROOD OF THE DARK MOON — CHARLES WILLARD DIFFIN — 360
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Helpless, Doomed, Into the Graveyard of Space Floats the Wrecked Ferryboat Pallas

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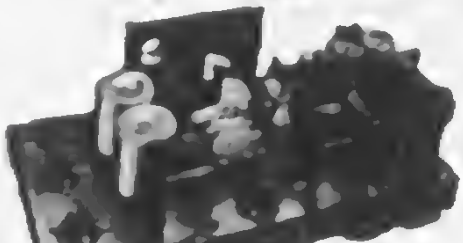
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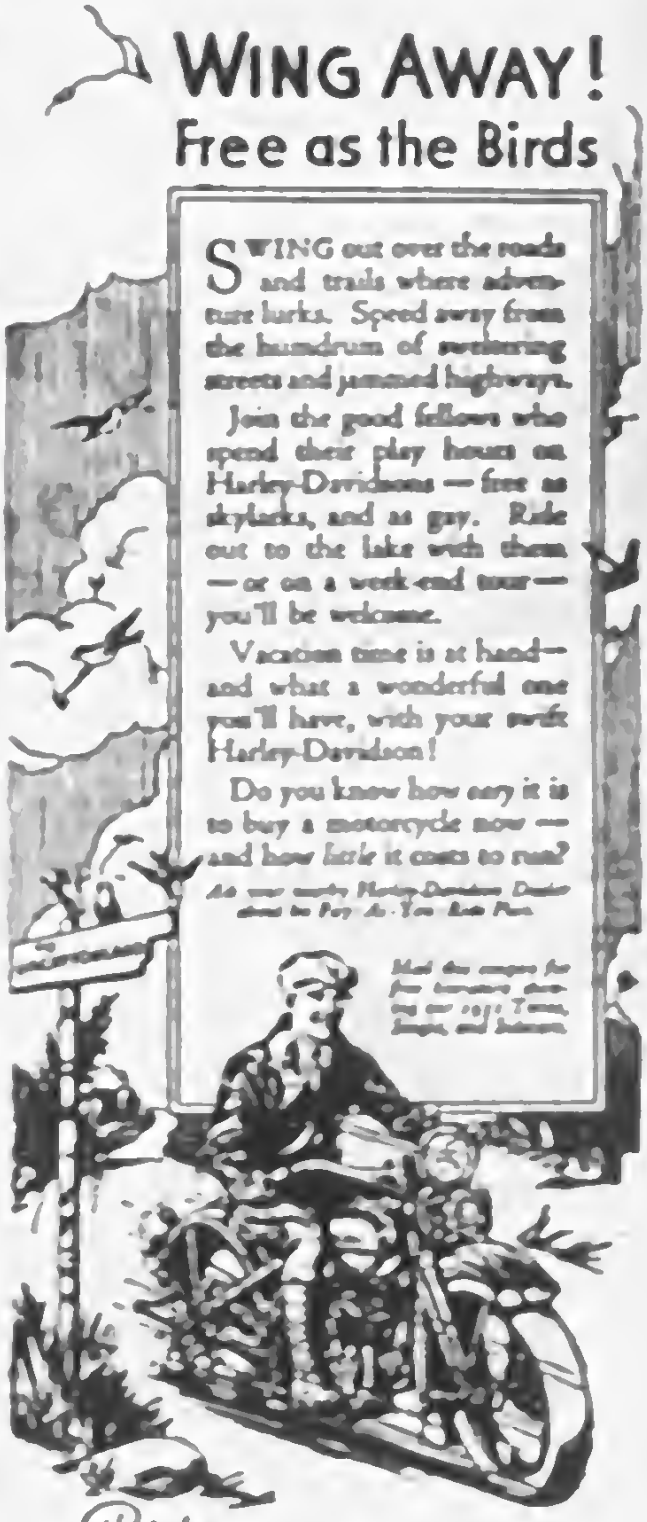
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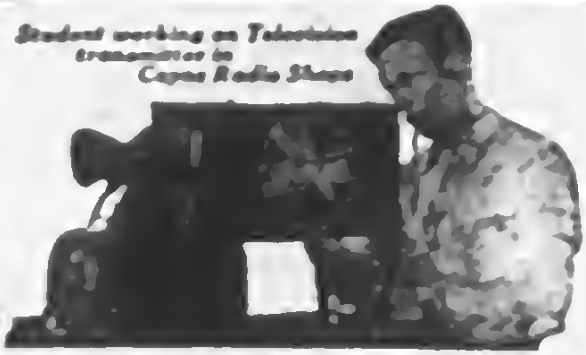
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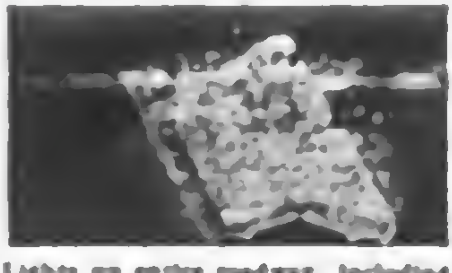
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No more driving "blind" on a crowded highway at night! An astonishing new invention banishes night wrecks and smash-ups. Ends fear of running over children or animals. Mail coupon quick for the manufacturer's introductory Free Test Offer.

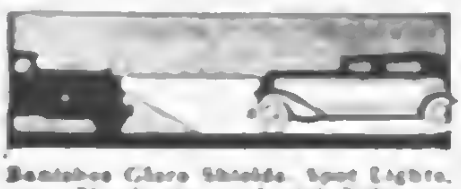
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AT LAST! An amazingly great yet simple invention like the flame and curse of night driving from the motoring world. Actually like magic this amazing new discovery replaces the "blind" in automobile headlights with truly blinding results. Road illumination is immensely doubled, yet glare is absolutely banished. Children, objects in the road, ruts, animals, obstructions, etc., are made clearly visible at least three times as far. Even cuts right through fog, mist, rain and snow. Throws you a solid wall of light 3 feet high, 30 to 50 feet wide. Instead of ordinary "direct" light, this beam is composed entirely of diffused or "reflected" light. This new kind of beam pours down the highway ahead of you so far that you can safely and easily go 50 miles an hour in safety. At 6 or 10 miles an hour city. It is positively safer than daylight because all the light is on the road and you are looking at your surroundings to distract you.

INEXPENSIVE

Patent rights to this new lighting invention are fully protected. It is not to any sense a new attachment. There is no wiring or installation. No extra up-keep. In the past millions of motorists have paid from $10 to $35 for so-called spot lights and driving lights that almost are only make-shifts. This new method does only a few cents as much and actually doubles road illumination with your present headlights. Cuts through the other fellow's lights as you can see the road, yet absolutely cannot glare in his eyes. No wonder fleet owners, manufacturers, taxi and bus lines, etc., such as Ehr Yellow & Checker, N. Y.; Blue and Gray Bus Lines; Columbus Fire Trucks, etc., are fast turning to this discovery as standard equipment. It is positively needed on every car in America, new or old right this minute.

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—*The Editor*

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80 Lafayette St., New York, N. Y.

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The Copper-Clad World

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE

By Harl Vincent

CHAPTER I

Into the Unknown

ADRIFT in space!

Blaine Carson worked frantically at the controls, his jaw set in grim lines and his eyes narrowed to anxious slits as he peered into the diamond-studded ebon of the heavens. A million miles astern he knew the red disk of the planet Mars was receding rapidly into the blackness. And the RX8 was streaking into the outer void at a terrific pace—out of control.

Something had warned him when they left Earth; the Martian cargo of k-metal was of enormous value and a direct invitation to piracy. Of course there was the attempt at secrecy and the shippers had sent

Blaine comes out of the hypnosis of the pink gas to find himself deep within Io, the copper-clad second satellite of Jupiter.



Sick and trembling, Blaine cried out against the massacre.

along those guards. His engineer, Tom Farley, was thoroughly reliable, too. But this failure of the control rocket-tubes, missing their destination as a result—there was something queer about it.

"Tommy," he called into the mike. "Find anything yet?"

"We-e-ll, something," the audiophone drawled after a moment: "I'm coming up."

"What is it, Tom?" he asked when the engineer's round face appeared at the head of the engine room companionway.

Farley dropped his voice and his customary smile was gone. "I found the stern rocket-tube ignition jammed so it's firing continuously," he said: "and the others are all dead: won't fire at all. That's why she doesn't swing to the controls?"

"Can't you fix it? Lord, man, we're headed out into the belt of planetoids. We'll be wrecked."

"Nothing I can do, Blaine, without shutting down the atomic engines. Then we'd freeze to death and run out of oxygen. These ships ought to have a spare engine just

to take care of the heating and air conditioning. I always said so."

"What happened to the ignition system?"

Tom Farley looked over his shoulder apprehensively. "Dirty work, Blaine," he whispered. "I'm sure of it. Tool marks on the breech of the stern tube. And there's one of those guards I don't like the looks of."

"Nonsense. The k-metal people know their men; they picked these three especially for the job."

"Who else could do it? There's only the five of us on board."

There might be something in what Tommy said, at that. A thing like this couldn't just happen by itself. And, come to think of it, one of those guards was a queer looking bird: dwarfed and hunchbacked, sort of, and with long dangling arms. It would be better to investigate.

"Get 'em up here, Tommy," Blaine said.

THE RX8 drove on and on through the uncharted wastes outside the orbit of Mars. None of the space ships of the inner planets ever ventured out this far, and Blaine knew there was grave danger of colliding with some of the small bodies with which the zone was infested. If one of those guards was the traitor he was risking his own neck as well as theirs.

Two of them entered the control room with Tom Farley, big, husky fellows of stolid countenance and armed with regulation flame-ray pistols and gas grenades.

"Where's the other, the dwarf?" Blaine asked, his suspicions mounting immediately.

"In his bunk." Tom replied with a meaning look. "He said he'd be up in a few minutes."

The pilot-commander addressed the guards "Fellows," he said, "I suppose you know we're in a serious fix. The ship is out of control and we've missed Mars, where your metal was to be delivered. We're speeding out into the unknown, out past the limits of space-travel toward the orbits of Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus—God knows where. And my engineer thinks that one of your number has tampered with the machinery. Know anything about it?" Blaine eyed them keenly.

One of the guards, Mahoney, flushed hotly. "No, sir," he snapped. "At least Kelly and meself had nothin' to do with it. But we've been suspicionin' that little Antarzo ever since we came out. It's a peculiar way he has about him, the divil."

"You think he—"

AN incisive voice from the doorway interrupted. "Never mind what he thinks, Carson. I'll do the thinking from now on."

As one man they turned to face the speaker. It was the guard, Antarzo, and he was clothed from neck to ankles in a garment of bright metallic stuff that shimmered with shifting colors like those of a soap bubble. A mask of similar stuff covered his face, and in each hand there was a weapon resembling a ray pistol but of strangely unfamiliar design.

Mahoney shot from the hip and his stabbing ray splashed full on the hunchback's chest—but harmlessly. That lustrous garment was an insulating armor; the traitorous guard should have been shriveled to a cinder at the contact. Antarzo laughed evilly as his own weapons loosed strange and terrible energies.

Tom Farley ducked, and Blaine watched in horrified amazement as the crackling streamers of blue radiance from the dwarf's pistols found their marks. Mahoney and Kelly, standing there, bathed for a brief instant in horrid blue fire; tottering, swaying, their mouths opened wide in a last agonized ef-

fort to cry out. Tiny pinpoints of brilliant pyrotechnics flashing and exploding within the columns of blue fire. Then, nothing! Where the two husky guards had stood there was utter emptiness; not even a shred of clothing remained. The air in the control room became heavy and acrid.

"Antarro!" White-faced and shaking, Blaine cried out in futile protest, "My God, man, what have you done? What does this mean?"

And then, in a blaze of rage, he was on his feet. Murder was in his heart as he set himself for a crashing charge that would sweep the beast from his feet. His own flame-pistol was missing; it was a case of killing this monster with his bare hands. Tom was circling over there, cursing horribly. One of them would get him. Strangely, Antarro had lowered the muzzles of his pistols.

A TERRIFIC punch, started from the floor, never reached its mark. Blaine saw a tiny puff of pinkish vapor that spurted from the bosom of that metallic garment. He was coughing and gasping; helpless. Muscles refused to do his bidding. With a moan he dropped into the pilot's seat, knowing that Antarro's will compelled him. That gas had hypnotic powers. Mechanically, his fingers strayed to the controls.

And Tom—good old Tommy—he was under the influence of the stuff too, creeping there on hands and knees toward the engine room companionway.

Antarro was talking. "We come now to the matter of instructions," he said. "You, Farley, will assist me in restoring the ignition system to normal. You, Carson, will keep to the controls and will lay a course to Jupiter as soon as the control rocket-tubes will respond. Understand?"

Tom growled reluctant assent from where he was crawling.

Strange, this hypnotic gas! Blaine's mind functioned clearly enough, yet he was utterly at the mercy of this madman's will—a robot of flesh and blood. "Jupiter!" he exclaimed. "Why man, it's nearly a half billion miles from the sun. Not habitable, either."

Antarro had removed his mask and now smiled a superior smile. "We'll reach it," he said: "the RX8 is very fast. And it's not the planet itself we're bound for, but its second satellite. Io, your astronomers call this body, and it's a world sadly in need of this marvelous k-metal."

"But—but—"

"Enough!" The hunchback snarled his rebuke in Blaine's face and turned to Tom. "Come, Farley," he said, as if talking to a child, "we must get to work."

IN a daze of conflicting emotions, Blaine turned to gaze through the forward port when the two had left the control room. The RX8 was accelerating rapidly under the steady discharge of gases from the stern rocket-tube and had already reached the speed of one thousand miles a second. If one of those tiny asteroids, even one no larger than a marble, should meet up with them it would crash through the hull plates as if they were paper. His heart went cold at the thought.

Oddly enough, he found himself *wanting* to make this trip with the demoniac Antarro. It was the effects of the pink gas. Even with the misshapen guard down there in the engine room the power of his will was effective. The devil must be an Ionian, he thought. But how in the name of the sky-lane imps had he reached Earth? How had he wormed his way into the confidence of the k-metal people? He must have been there several years, working to this very end.

There was a tinkling crash on the starboard side amidships; a screaming swish as something slithered along the side and caromed off into the void. One of those little planetoids. Probably no bigger than a pea, and luckily they had struck it glancingly. He wiped the sudden perspiration from his forehead.

Pressure on the directive rocket controls brought no response. Would they never finish with that ignition system?

A gleaming light-fleck segregated itself from the mass of stars ahead. At first he thought he imagined it, but a second examination, this time through the telescope, convinced him it was growing larger. Drawing nearer, it was, and resolving itself into a well defined orb that was directly in their path. Fifteen hundred miles a second, the indicator read now! They'd never know what happened when they struck.

"Tommy!" he bellowed into the mike. "Are you fellows ever going to finish down there?"

THERE was no reply for a moment, and the blue-white globe drove madly toward them. He consulted the chart. Pallas—an asteroid some three hundred miles in diameter. Not very big as celestial bodies go, but big enough!

"Just one minute now." It was Tommy's voice coming drearily, unnaturally through the audiophone. A minute! Ninety thousand miles! It seemed the asteroid was that close already.

Antarzo was in the control room then, and the effect of his mental dominance became more pronounced. Suddenly the dwarf let out a shriek of terror when he looked through the port and saw the brilliant body that now loomed so close. Blaine experienced a savage joy in the knowledge that the hunchback was mortally afraid.

"Latza! Latza!" In his fear Antarzo lapsed into his own tongue. Then, remembering, he shouted, "We're ready, Carson. Swing wide!"

The directive rockets answered to their controls now. Quick pressure on this, a swift pull on that, swinging the energy value to maximum, brought results. The little vessel groaned and shivered under the strain as a full blast from the forward tubes retarded them. Her hull plates twisted and screeched as the steering tubes belched full energy in swinging them from their course. They were thrown forward violently, though the deceleration compensators were working to the utmost.

Pallas swung around in their field of vision, and there was a fleeting glimpse of sun-lit spires of mountains, shadowed valleys, and mysterious crevasses from which clouds of steam and yellow vapor curled. Still it seemed they must crash against one of those slender pinnacles. Nearer it came like a flash; a dizzying blur, now, that drove directly in their straining faces.

And then, abruptly, it was gone. Already thousands of miles astern, the danger was past. Miraculously, they had escaped.

Antarzo laughed; a hollow mirthless cackle. His fingers shook crazily when he untwisted them from their grip on the port rail.

"Good work, my friend. Very good, indeed," he jabbered, his chin quivering in nervous reaction. "And now we carry on—on to Io."

Blaine Carson, almost wishing they had collided with the spire, set himself grimly to the task. He was powerless to refuse.

CHAPTER II

The Second Satellite

WHEN, eventually, they swung into the orbit of Jupiter and headed in toward the

enormous red-belted body, the two Earth men were heartily disgusted with the voyage and with themselves. Repeated doses of the pink gas—the ignominy of their utter subservience to the will of Antarzo—had worn them down no less than had the hard work and loss of sleep. Both were in vile humor. They endured the triumphant chatter of their captor in bitter silence.

"Over there, my friends," he said, pointing; "see? It is our destination. The golden crescent, Io, is something over a quarter million of your miles from the mother planet. See it? It is home, my friends; home to me and for yourselves in the future—if the Zara spares your lives. Lay your course to the body, Carson."

Blaine growled as he sighted through the telescope. Yet, in spite of his fury, he could not overcome the feeling of excitement that came to him when the powerful glass brought the satellite near. This body was like nothing else in the heavens. Antarzo had called it the golden crescent. Rather, it was of gleaming coppery hue, and now, as they swung around, it was fully illuminated—a brilliant sphere of unbroken contour. Smoothly globular, there was not one projection or indentation to indicate the existence of land or sea, mountain or valley, on its surface. It was like a ball of solid copper, scintillant there in the weak sunlight and the reflected light from its great mother planet.

Antarzo laughed over his absorption. "Looks peculiar to you, does it not?" he asked; "rather different from any of the bodies you have visited, you are thinking."

Blaine grunted wordless assent. The globe that was Io rushed in to meet them, growing ever larger in the field of the telescope. Now it appeared that there were tiny seams in the smooth surface, a regular criss-cross pattern of fine lines that looked like—Lord, yes, that was it! The body was constructed from an infinite number of copper plates, riveted or brazed together to form a perfect sphere.

"WHY, the thing's made of copper!" Blaine gasped. "Copper plates. It's a man-made world; artificial. But where are the inhabitants?"

Antarzo laughed uproariously. "Not man-made, my friend," he corrected, "but preserved by man for his own salvation. A dying world, it was, and the cleverest scientists in the universe saved it and themselves from certain death. What you see is merely a shell of copper, the covering they constructed to retain an atmosphere and make continuation of life possible—inside."

"Your people live *inside* that shell?" Blaine was incredulous.

"What else? We must have air to breathe and warmth for our bodies. How else could we have retained it?"

It was staggering, this revelation. The young pilot could not conceive of a completely enclosed world with inhabitants forever shut off from the light of the sun by day and from the beauties of the heavens by night. Yet here it was, drawing ever nearer, a colossal monument to the ingenuity and handiwork of a highly intelligent civilization who had labored probably for centuries to preserve their kind. A titanic task! Who could imagine a sphere of metal more than twenty-four hundred miles in diameter enclosing a world and its peoples? A copper-clad world!

They were coming in close now, and the gravitational pull of the body made itself felt. Blaine was busy with the controls, sending tremendous blasts from the forward rocket-tubes to retard their speed for a safe landing. The incredibly

smooth copper surface was just beneath them, stretching miles away to the horizon in all directions.

The inductor compass was functioning. Evidently Io possessed as strong a magnetic field as did the inner planets. Antarzo now consulted a chart which he drew from his pocket, and examined minutely the surface over which they were speeding. Here and there curious designs were etched on the copper plates, and it was from these he determined their course. Obviously there was an entrance to this sealed-in world.

WHEN they had proceeded some two thousand miles in a northeasterly direction Antarzo gave the order to reduce speed. Off at the horizon there appeared a bulge in the copper surface, a round protuberance that resolved itself into a great dome-shaped structure as they drew nearer. A full two hundred feet it reared itself into the heavens, and Blaine saw a number of large circular hatches in its side that evidently covered air-locked entrances.

"You will land close by the dome, Carson," Antarzo barked, "and both of you will get into your moon-suits."

At his tone Blaine saw red. He realized on the instant that the effect of the pink gas had worn off and that he was his own master once more. All the pent-up emotions of the past few days were unleashed. If only he could get in one good punch. They might get away yet. There was plenty of k-metal to replenish the fuel supply. He whirled suddenly, muscles tensed. He faced the grinning hunchback—and was greeted by a breath-taking spurt of the pink gas. This time it was not merely a subjecting of his own will to that of the master but a complete hypnotism, a somnambulistic state. As in a dream he turned to the controls.

Now it came to him that the dwarf no longer spoke. He worked his will entirely without words; his evil mind possessed fully the mind of his victim. For Blaine Carson there was no further independent thinking. He was an automaton, a sleep-walker.

LIKE a detached and more or less disinterested observer, he saw that he had landed the ship. Then he noticed three dwarfs in bulky, helmeted moon-suits, shuffling clumsily across the copper plates. Hazily he knew he was with the others in an airlock; the hiss and the throbbing of pumps told him that. Under the great dome there was the latticework of a huge reflecting telescope; strange pigmy figures scuttled here and there, working at curious machines. There was the constant purr of many motors, the gentle pulsation of floor-plates beneath his feet.

With the moon-suit removed, he realized the atmosphere was fetid and stifling. A great pressure bore on his lungs, making breathing labored and difficult. And then they were in a lift that dropped into the depths of its shaft with dizzying speed. Antarzo's grin; Tom's eyes, dull and lifeless, floating there in the haze before his own—it was all a nightmare from which he must soon awaken.

There followed a period of complete unconsciousness of movement and of his surroundings. Light—light everywhere; a blue-white radiance that beat upon his unseeing eyes with unrelenting ferocity. Stabbing pains bored into his very brain, pains that carried with them an unspoken and unintelligible command. Why couldn't they let him alone; leave him to die in peace? He knew he was on his feet, swaying. There were voices, strident and guttural, and then by

some magic the veil was lifted. His brain cleared and he saw that he stood before a dais where a much bejeweled and resplendently clad woman sat curled in the luxurious cushions of a golden seat. Chalk-white was her face and her lips crimson; amazing eyes, cat's eyes, pupils red-flecked and glittering, stared out at him.

"THE Zara," Antarzo whispered. "You will make obeisance."

Mechanically, Blaine dropped to his knees and touched his forehead to the floor. Tom Farley, over there, was doing the same, but Antarzo stood erect with arms crossed over his chest and head thrown back. The eyes of the Zara swept him contemptuously from head to foot. All was not well between them.

Blaine arose from his humiliating position at a sharp command from the hunchback. Tommy did likewise and the two exchanged sheepish looks. The effects of the pink gas were wearing off once more. They were in a large hall, obviously the throne room of a palace. Men-at-arms lined the walls on either side of the dais, and these were straight limbed giants with green-bronze skin and regular features—not at all like the deformed Ionian who had captured them and stolen the RX8.

The Zara talked rapidly in throaty gutturals, her fierce gaze directed at Antarzo and her brows drawn together in a scowl that could have but one meaning. She was displeased with the hunchback, displeased and furiously angry. What was it all about? Hadn't he brought home the bacon—the k-metal they were after? Blaine was nonplused.

Then Antarzo replied to the woman who was obviously his queen. His voice rose in shrill disagreement and his scowl was as fierce as the Zara's. Threatening her, he was, the nervy devil. He clenched his fists and raised his arms in an angry gesture, pacing the floor in his fury and thrusting out a pugnacious chin while he raved. This Zara woman rose higher in her cushions, and the look that flashed from those terrible eyes would have warned a less excited human, however justifiable his anger might be. But Antarzo was in too deep to draw back, that was plain to be seen. Blaine held his breath in anticipation of an explosion.

IT came then, that explosion, and in a way entirely unexpected and horrible to behold. The tiger woman uttered one fierce sibilant like the hiss of a serpent, a terrifying sound that silenced the hunchback and brought him stiffly to attention, mouth open and eyes bulging with horror. One of those unbelievably white arms stretched forth, threateningly tense, and a jeweled finger leveled itself at the rash Ionian. From it there flashed an intangible something that leaped to bridge the distance with the speed of light, something that screeched as it flew and crashed like breaking glass when it struck Antarzo's horrified face. In an instant he was on the floor, screaming and writhing in mortal agony.

The Zara watched with compressed lips and livid features as a host of black disk-like things covered the squirming body, spinning madly as if driven by atomic energy and emitting a myriad high-pitched tones like the angry buzzing of a swarm of bees. Antarzo's body shriveled as the things hummed on in their devilish work. Soon there was but a tiny heap of clothing with the angry black disks whirling and singing their song of hate. And then, in a puff of thick yellow vapor they were gone, their gruesome work completed. The odor of putrefaction lay heavy on the air.

Blaine shuddered and a fit of nausea twisted his vitals. It served the devil right, of course, but it was a horrible way to go. These damned Ionians, even to their queen, were bloodthirsty creatures. And what devilish ingenuity they had displayed in their development of weapons! His eyes were drawn irresistibly to the flaming orbs of the Zara.

She was actually smiling at him, this beautiful, heartless animal, not a smile of derision but one of deliberate allure. He felt the hot blood mount to his temples. A languid arm beckoned him to her side and the amazing creature settled back in her cushions with the drowsy, contented motions of a lazy feline.

"Watch your step!" Tommy hissed.

That warning was unnecessary. Blaine shook his head and backed away from the dais, an instinctive recoiling from a loathsome thing. The Zara saw and understood; and she went again into a black rage. She sat stiffly erect and called rapid orders to her men-at-arms.

The Earth men were surrounded instantly, their arms and legs pinioned by powerful hands, their feeble resistance overcome by the bronze giants as easily as if they had been children. Helpless and hopeless, they were borne from the room.

THIS was the end of the story, Blaine thought. Why this Zara woman had not made away with them at once was a mystery. Perhaps they were being reserved for an even more terrible fate than that of the hunchback. They were being carried along a dim-lit passage now, and Tom was cursing his captors in a never-ending stream of invective.

A metal door opened and then clanged shut behind them. They were dumped unceremoniously on metal tables that resembled those of a hospital operating-room on Earth. Woven bands, quickly adjusted by the bronze giants held them fast. Blaine turned his head and saw that Tommy was still struggling against the inevitable. A gag had been placed in his mouth; that was why he had ceased reviling the Zara's servitors.

The room was cluttered with elaborate and complicated mechanisms that Blaine could not recognize in the slightest detail, excepting that there were many banks of slender glass cylinders which bore some resemblance to the vacuum tubes used on the inner planets for radio communication and television. One of the bronze giants, he saw, was bringing a metal cap from which a cable extended to one of the strange machines. This cap was forced down over his head with a none too gentle pressure and he could see no more.

There came a sharp buzz from the machine and a million stinging needles drove into his brain. There was a moment of fleeting visions; strange places he viewed, and strange creatures parading in a fantasmagoria of delirium before his aching eyes. Voices, harsh and guttural, spoke in his drumming ears; voices that were dimly understandable, though uttered in the tongue spoken by Antarro and the Zara. Then came sudden and merciful unconsciousness.

CHAPTER III

Ilen-dar

WHEN Blaine Carson opened his eyes it was to stare at the blue-white radiance of an illuminated ceiling. He lay on a downy cot and it seemed he had just recovered from a long illness. Weak and sick, he turned his head listlessly to gaze at the ornate embossed designs on a wall of gleaming silvery metal. What place was

this? His mind was wool-gathering; dim memories of unspeakable things struggled for mastery over a hazy consciousness. Suddenly then he remembered, and he sat up in his unfamiliar bed, senses acutely alert.

Across the room he saw a figure hunched in a chair; a twisted man-creature who was oddly like someone he had seen. Antazzo! But this one had none of the other's ferocity as he returned Blaine's stare. Rather, there was a look of deep concern in his ugly face. He came immediately to the bedside and looked at Blaine solicitously.

"I see you have recovered," he said. "It is good."

Blaine stared and stared. This creature had spoken in the language of the Zara's subjects, yet he understood his every word! It must be a dream, this impossible thing that had happened. And where was Tom? Abruptly he found that he was talking rapidly in this tongue of an alien race.

"Yes, I've recovered," he said, "and I'm amazed at what I find. How have I acquired this knowledge of your language? Where am I, and where is my friend? Can you enlighten me in these things?"

The other smiled. "I can, Earth man," he replied. "You have been taught our language while you slept. A thought transference process we use for educating the young. You are in the palace of the Zara and your friend is safe in the next room. I may add that you are in high favor with Her Majesty."

The wizened creature lowered his voice on the last words, and his knowing eyes spoke volumes. In favor with that she-devil! Blaine went cold at the thought.

"I want to see my friend," he said shortly.

"Later. My orders are to bring you to the Zara immediately you are strong enough. And Pegrani obeys orders."

No use to attempt a break now. Blaine was tempted to drive a fist into that ugly countenance and fight his way out of the place. But that would be suicide. He'd wait, get the lay of the land first and then try to dope something out with Tommy.

"All right, Pegrani," he said, "I'm ready to go before this Zara of yours."

As he prepared for the audience, alien thoughts crowded one upon the other in his strangely enlightened mind. With the knowledge of the language had come knowledge of many things relative to the copper-clad world. They'd given him a liberal education. Somehow he knew these stunted creatures like Antazzo and Pegrani were known as Llotta and that, while ruling the sealed-in planet, their kind had originally come from Ganymede, the fifth satellite of Jupiter. Centuries had passed since the inhabitants of Europa and Ganymede had been forced to desert their aging worlds and had settled on Io. During other centuries the widely different peoples had cooperated in constructing the great copper enclosure in order to keep the new world alive and capable of supporting life. Then had come a century of bitter warfare in which the Llotta were victorious. Intense hatred existed between the two races, he knew, and a hazy impression of mechanically imparted knowledge told him that few of the Europans remained alive.

"We are here, Carson," his guide announced, when they stood before the square columns of an enormous portal.

The scene in the throne room was vastly different than when he had first visited it. The Zara sat curled as before, a golden bowl of incense burning at either side of the throne. The men-at-arms were absent and, instead, there were dozens of hand-

maidens, white-skinned and seductive as their queen, reclining on luxurious cushions that were arranged in a semicircle before the dais. It was a scene of Oriental splendor. A stage carefully set.

PEGRANI knelt and touched his forehead to the floor but Blaine held himself stiffly erect, looking straight into the eyes of the Zara. She smiled and extended her arm in that beckoning gesture.

"You may leave now, Pegrani," she said, without deigning him a glance. "Remain in the corridor until I send for you."

There was a tense silence as the Zara's gaze, ineffably softened now, held Blaine's. Unconsciously he was drawn to the steps of the dais. Unwillingly, yet inexorably, his lagging footsteps brought him to her side. Cool white fingers touched his arm and he saw that the red flecks in the black of those wide eyes were golden now. Surely there was no harm in this woman. But he remembered Antarzo.

"Carson," she purred, "you are more than welcome to Llotta-nar, the land of my people and the ruling power of Antrid, the body you call Io. The freedom of the realm is yours for as long a time as you wish to remain."

This was too good to be true. "You—you mean," he stammered, "that Antarzo exceeded his authority in his act of piracy—in bringing us here?"

The golden flecks flashed red and a cold note was manifest in the throaty voice. "Antarzo," she replied, "was destroyed for his audacious actions. We needed this k-metal of yours, Carson, and he was sent to Earth to get a quantity of the material. By magnetic directional waves was he sent—we have no space-ships—his body disintegrated by my scientists for transmittal, and the atoms of his beastly form reassembled in their proper relation when he arrived there. But he threatened me when he returned successful. The possession of the k-metal and his knowledge of its powers and uses had gone to his head. He demanded my hand in return for his work; demanded that he be permitted to mount the throne of Llotta-nar as my consort. Therefore I destroyed him." The hard eyes softened anew. "And—and for his abominable treatment of you I destroyed him," she concluded.

BLAINE fought off the spell of those gold-flecked eyes; he looked away in sudden panic. This creature was not telling the truth. She was hiding something; a sinister motive lay beneath her smooth speech.

"My friend," he said abruptly: "what of him?"

"For your sake, my Carson," she purred, "he too shall have the freedom of the realm for as long a time as is desired."

The cool fingers crept along his arm, firm and compelling. "Look at me," she whispered.

He thought of the pink gas as his eyes were drawn irresistibly to hers. What he saw in those gold-flecked depths sent a shiver of apprehension chasing down his spine. Savage, devastating desire mingled with ill-concealed rage at his coldness. This beautiful animal could turn like a flash and rend him limb from limb—and would on the slightest provocation.

A commotion in the corridor caused her to release him and sit bolt upright. Temporarily relieved, Blaine wheeled to face the portal. Tommy had broken loose! He heard his strident voice, berating an unseen antagonist in the tongue of the Llotta.

Then they were in the room, Tommy struggling and arguing vociferously with one of the green-

bronze guards. The handmaidens had deserted their cushions and were milling about in affrighted confusion. The Zara's sibilant exclamation startled him into looking at her once more. The same cold fury that had greeted Antarro glinted icy-hard in that grimly beautiful face. It was all over for poor Tommy.

BUT the Zara reached upward and stroked a transparent rod that dangled above the throne, something he had not noticed before. A screaming vibrant note smote the heavy air, a pulsation that beat at the ear drums with painful intensity. Silence fell as the awesome sound died away and echoed faintly from the huge columns that supported the arched ceiling. Tommy cooled off when he saw that Blaine was unharmed.

"Drekan!" The Zara's voice was a whiplash as she addressed the guard. "You will leave my presence and report to your overman for punishment. Never again molest the Earth men. Begone!"

Agsin this amazing woman curled in her cushions and again she purred. Tommy watched in open mouthed astonishment as she smiled guilelessly on his friend.

"You may leave me now, my Carson," she cooed. "Farley is free to accompany you. Pegrani will guide you and inform you regarding our customs and our people. You will learn much. And then you shall return to Zara Clyone."

Blaine had fully expected that Tommy would die a horrible death before his eyes, and in his sudden relief bent low and kissed the cold white hand of the Zara. A foolish thing to do! She purred and snuggled into the cushions like the feline she was—a dangerous animal; claws drawn in now but ready to strike out, razor sharp, on a moment's notice.

PEGRANI led them along the corridor to a lift. The car shot upward with breath-taking speed.

"Say!" Tommy was growling, in English. "What's the big idea? You've got the old girl ga-ga. Trying to vamp her into letting us off easy?"

"Shut up!" Blaine returned, irritated. "I don't know where we stand any more than you do. But we're going to sit tight now and see what happens. No more rough stuff from you, either."

"What! You're going to just stand around and take it—whatever they hand us?"

"Of course not. But the time isn't ripe yet. We'll have to wait till we know what it's all about."

They were outside then, on the palace roof, and Pegrani motioned them to a railed-in runway that circled its edge. High overhead was the shadowy blackness of the copper shell that enclosed the satellite. Huge latticed columns, line upon line of them, stretched off into the distance as far as the eye could follow; enormous white metal supports that carried the immense weight of the covering which retained the dense and humid atmosphere. Myriads of tiny blue-white suns there seemed to be, stretching off between the columns, carried on thick cables and radiating the artificial daylight of the interior. Hot, damp odors wafted across the roof, the odors of decayed vegetation.

Most amazing of all, were the dwellings. In orderly rows like the columns, they were flat topped cylindrical things that reminded Blaine of nothing so much as the tanks of an oil refinery back home. And the space between was overgrown with dense tropical vegetation, tangled and matted and shooting transparent tubular stems up to a height of a hundred feet or more where they sprouted great

spherical growths that looked like enormous sponges. Of a sickly, pale green hue, these growths overran everything; climbed the columns and were lost in the shadows above the multitude of lights. The big sponge-like blossoms expanded and contracted rhythmically. Breathing, they were, like living things. Specially cultivated plant life to assist in maintaining the oxygen supply balance by decomposition of carbon dioxide. A marvelous artificial world!

"THE streets and moving ways are in tunnels beneath the soil," Pegrani was explaining. "What lies before you is the city of Ilen-dar, capital city of the empire, and like all other cities of Antrid, it is self-sustaining. The vegetation is inedible, all of our food is synthetic and highly concentrated. You were fed by intravenous injection while under the influence of the language machines. Our heat and power is obtained from the internal fires of Antrid, and, alas, these are being exhausted with great rapidity. Our shortage of power is becoming acute, and again our peoples are facing extinction."

That explained their need for the k-metal. It came to Blaine, in a flash that Antrid was in sore straits and that this expedition to Earth had more back of it than had been revealed. Even with the supply of k-metal Antarro had stolen, they could not carry on forever.

A screaming object went hurtling through the blackness over their heads. Something, a vehicle of enormous size with rows of lighted ports on the under side, that roared its way under the roof of copper and was gone in an instant.

"One of our monorail cars," Pegrani told them: "a complete system interconnects all cities and divisions. They are capable of circling the globe in a day of your time.

Their familiarity with conditions on Earth was astonishing. Probably Antarro was but one of many spies who had been sent to the inner planets. Pegrani discussed the speed in their own terms.

SOMEONE had crept up behind them; a slight, olive-skinned youth who touched Blaine softly on the shoulder. Pegrani did not see. He was pointing into the distance and expounding on the merits of the monorail system. The youth touched a finger to his lips to enjoin silence, and thrust a crumpled ball of metal foil into Blaine's hand before the pilot realized his intention. A message, undoubtedly!

Some instinct, or some slight sound, warned Pegrani and he turned on his heel just as the slender lad was slinking away. Black rage contorted his features and Blaine saw him make a quick motion toward the inner folds of his jacket.

"Pegrani!" he shouted as he saw a glint of steel. "Don't!"

But it was too late and the Llott paid him no attention, anyway. One of those wicked ray pistols sent forth its crackling blue flame and the youth stood there, bathed in the eery blue light; dazzling blasts of exploding atoms were seen within the flare. Then there was the nothingness into which Mahoney and Kelly had gone.

Blaine shouted horrified and angry protest and Tommy rushed in to mix it with their guide. But the glowing ray pistol waved them back. Other guards—the big green-bronze ones—were running in their direction.

"The message!" Pegrani snapped. "Give it to me."

Quick as a flash Blaine crumpled the foil more tightly. A hard little pellet now, he tossed it over the rail far into the matted vegetation

below. One might as well hunt for a needle in a haystack as for that tiny ball. But Pegrani would not forget; he'd report to the Zara. They were in for it now.

CHAPTER IV

Before the Council

PEGRANI lost no time in reporting the incident to the Zara. The Earth men were hustled to the throne room of the palace where the leopard woman sat in conference with her advisers. An ominous silence greeted their entrance. Ugly faces leered at them from the long table.

"What is it, Pegrani?" The Zara's chalky face went whiter still.

"The Rulans, your Majesty. They have endeavored to communicate with the prisoners."

"Did they succeed?" Clyone's voice was terrible in its fury.

"They did not. I destroyed the messenger, and the message itself was lost in the jungle where Carson flung it."

The Zara shot a fleeting glance in Blaine's direction and permitted herself the ghost of a smile. "It is well," she breathed. "But it must not happen again. Have Tiedor brought to me."

Pegrani hurried off to do her bidding and Blaine turned uncertainly to follow.

"You will remain, Carson—you and Farley." The incisive voice of the leopard woman halted him in his tracks.

Tiedor was chief of the Rulans, it developed. There was but a handful of them in the realm and they were the last survivors of the civilization of Europa; descendants of those original brave souls who had settled on Io as a last resort in the effort to perpetuate their kind.

He was a magnificent creature, this Tiedor, tall and straight in his muscular leanness and with wide-set gray eyes in the face of a Greek god. Olive-skinned like the messenger, he was, and with the high forehead of an intellectual. He swept the assemblage with a haughty gaze when he faced the Zara.

"TIEDOR," she snarled, "it has come to my ears that a Rulan iad carried a message to one of my guests from Earth. What means this?"

"I know nothing about it, Your Majesty." Tiedor gazed into the wicked eyes, unafraid. —

"You lie! There is some treasonable scheme in which you had hoped to enlist their help. You will tell me the entire story, here before the council."

"There is nothing to tell."

"You will confess or I shall destroy every Rulan in the Tritu Nogaru." The Zara's words were clipped short with deadly emphasis.

Tiedor paled and his lips tightened in a grim line, but he stood his ground. "I have nothing to confess," he said.

With a whistling indrawn breath, the leopard woman threw back her head and motioned to one of the green-bronze giants who guarded the entrance. There was a nervous stir around the council table.

At her command the guard drew back a heavy drape that hid an embrasure in the far wall. There, on a stubby pedestal, was revealed a gleaming sphere of crystal, a huge polished ball that shimmered a ghastly green against a background of jet.

Slowly in its depths a milky cloud took shape, swirling and pulsating like a living thing. Then it flashed into dazzling brilliance and the globe cleared to startling transparency. It was as if it did not exist. Rather they looked through an opening in the cosmos that carried their gaze to another and

distant point. It was a large open space that was revealed to their eyes; a sort of public square where many of the olive-skinned Rulans were coming and going to and from the entrances of the circular tank-like structures that surrounded the area. They were greeting one another in solemn fashion as they passed and watching furtively the green-bronze guards who were everywhere. The sound of their low voiced conversations came clear and distinct from the depths of the crystal sphere.

"Your choice, Tiedor," the Zara hissed.

"There is nothing—nothing, I tell you!" The Rulan chief's voice was panicky now.

CLYONE'S snarling command was carried to those guards out there in the Tritu Nogara by some magic of the crystal sphere. As one man they snapped to attention. With deadly accuracy they released the energy of their ray pistols. It was a shambles, that square of the Tritu Nogaru; a slaughter house. Agonized screams of the doomed Rulans rent the air of the council chamber. They organized hastily and rushed again and again into the crackling blue flame of the disintegrating blasts of the guards' fire. It was hopeless: unarmed and unprotected, they were at the mercy of Clyone's minions.

Sick and trembling, Blaine cried out against the massacre. He was seized instantly by two of the green-bronze guards who had been watching his every move. Tommy, too, was in their clutches once more, fighting valiantly but without avail. The sphere went blank and silent, and the drape was returned to its place. Still muttering disapproval, the members of the council gazed at their queen in alarm. There was no telling what this vile creature might do.

"The slaughter continues, Tiedor," she gloated. "Soon your handful of followers will be no more. And good riddance."

Swaying drunkenly, eyes glazed with the horror of the thing, Tiedor went raving mad. In one wild leap he was upon her, his fingers sinking into the white flesh of her throat. Woman or no woman, he'd have her life.

But it was not to be. A quick move of jeweled fingers was followed by a crashing report. Tiedor staggered and drew back, spinning on his heel to face them all with distended, pain-crazed eyes. Astonishment was there, and horror, but the fire of undying courage remained. His olive skin turned suddenly purple, then black from the poisoned dart that had exploded in his entrails. He collapsed in a still heap at the feet of the Zara.

She stood there a moment in the awful silence, caressing her bruised throat with fluttering fingers. She had faced death for one horrid instant and was obviously shaken.

Then she recovered and flew into a rage. "Out of my sight, all of you!" she screamed. "Out, I say! The Earth men are to be freed and Pegrani will conduct them to their quarters. Go now!"

The councillors made haste to comply, jostling one another in their anxiety to jam through the doorway. Blaine found himself released. He took one step toward Clyone, murderous hatred in his heart. But he recoiled from the expression in those red-flecked eyes: they softened instantly and looked into his very soul, saw through and beyond him into some far place where relief and happiness might be attained. And then, suddenly, they were swimming in tears. The Zara dropped into a seat and buried her sleek coiffured head in outstretched arms, her shoulders shaking with sobs.

An incomprehensible anomaly, this queen of the Llotta; a strange mixture of cruelty and tenderness, of cold hatred and the longing for love. A dual personality hers, susceptible to the deepest emotion or to utter lack of feeling as the mood might dictate.

Blaine tiptoed softly from the room.

THEY were in the corridor now, and Tommy was blowing off at a great rate. Even Pegrani was stunned and shaken. But Tommy raved.

"Forget it!" Blaine growled. "Where do we go from here?" He couldn't have explained his emotions then, even to himself.

"To our quarters, she said—damn her!" Tom Farley swore in picturesque English. "And we," he wound up his expressive tirade, "are getting in deeper and deeper. We can't do a thing. Why in the devil doesn't she put us out of the way and get it over with? What's she keeping us around for, anyway?"

Blaine was asking himself that very question. Pegrani regarded them with something of understanding in his beady eyes. But he was nervous and apprehensive and broke in on their conversation to urge them into action. The Zara must be obeyed.

The corridor was deserted now and their footsteps echoed hollowly from the bare metal walls. Pegrani was ahead, leading the way, when Blaine was startled by an insistent tap on his shoulder. Another of the Rulans, it was, repeating the gesture of the youth who had been killed on the roof. But this one had no message; he was after something else—telling them in pantomime to make a break for freedom and to follow him.

Blaine caught Tommy's attention. And Pegrani, warned again by that sixth sense of his, turned his head. With a bellow of rage he whirled into action, ray pistol in hand. But Blaine was prepared for him this time. He wasn't going to witness another murder—not now. Flinging Tom Farley aside, he let loose a terrific jab that landed full on Pegrani's mouth. The ray pistol crackled harmlessly, its deadly energy spending itself in searing the metal of the ceiling.

THEN he wrenched the weapon from the astonished Llott and was boring in with body punches that quickly had the dwarf gasping for breath. These creatures knew nothing of fighting with their hands except in the fashion of clumsy wrestlers. The thud of hard fists against yielding flesh was a new and terrifying experience. Pegrani was game, though, and he flailed about with his powerful arms, endeavoring to get his opponent in his grasp. Sidestepping to avoid one of his rushes, Blaine brought up a terrible uppercut that ended flush upon the Llott's jaw. His head snapped back and his knees gave way beneath him. Down he went in a flabby heap. Suddenly ashamed, the young pilot turned to the Rulan.

Tom's eyes were shining. It was easy to see that he felt better about things now.

"I am a friend," the Rulan whispered in the Llott tongue, "sent by one who would have conversation with you. It is of the highest importance, but we must make haste. Will you trust me?"

Blaine saw deep concern and sincerity in the fellow's blue eyes. "What do you say, Tommy?" he asked, looking to his friend for approval.

"I say, let's go. He seems okay to me."

Their new guide was familiar with the passages and especially so with dark and little used stairways that

connected the floors of the huge building. They soon reached the roof through a hatch that opened on a small pent house which was in deep shadow and entirely hidden from the runways where the green-bronze guards paced constantly.

A slender cable dangled before them, and at its lower end they saw a basket-like car which their guide bid them enter. When they had done so, he tugged on the cable, giving a rapid twitching signal. Instantly they were soaring up into the blackness above the lights of Antrid.

THE swift journey ended in a tiny enclosed vehicle where another Rulan operated the cable drum which had made the trip possible. The car was unlighted save for the faint glow of a hand lamp, and it was not until the lower door was closed that they were permitted a view of the interior of the strange vehicle and had a good look at the two Rulans.

"Now," the one who had brought them said, "I can explain. I am Tiedus, son of Tiedor. My companion is Dantus, son of Dantor, the greatest scientist in all Antrid. We are taking you to Dantor who has knowledge of the mad plans of the Llotta and is in need of your help in thwarting them. You are willing?"

"Why—why, yes," Blaine stammered, looking deep into the earnest eyes of Tiedus. "You—you know of the fate of Tiedor?"

"I do." The young Rulan fell silent; then shook his head as if to clear it of unwelcome thoughts. "There are but few of us left, oh Earth man," he said then, "and all expect a like fate sooner or later. But that is beside the point. We have important work to do; work that brooks no delay. We leave now for the Tritu Anu, with your consent."

Tom Farley was examining the machinery of the car with interest. "This one of the monorail cars?" he inquired, when Dantus had seated himself at the controls.

"Indeed not. The Llotta do not even know of the existence of this vehicle. We could not get right of way on the rails, so this gravity car was developed in secrecy. It is provided with variable repulsion energies that can be adjusted to keep it at a fixed distance from the inner surface of the copper shell. Thus it misses cross beams and braces. It is drawn forward by similar energies, or more exactly, by the component of a number of attracting forces. We do not display lights, so are thus comparatively safe from discovery. They'll catch us sooner or later, though, of course." Dantus indulged in a fatalistic shrug of his shoulders as he concluded.

AT his manipulation of a number of tiny levers that were set into the control panels like the stops of an organ, the car lurched forward. Silently, swiftly, they sped on through the gloom under the great copper shell.

Through the viewing glass of a periscope arrangement that let no betraying light escape to the outside, they watched the endless lines of illuminating globes slip by beneath them. Weirdly vast and shadowy in the upper reaches, the latticed supporting columns on either side merged into continuous semi-transparent walls as the car gathered speed.

The city of Ilen-dar was left far behind. Patches of jungle flashed by; other cities. And always the endless rows of blue-white lights. There was neither night nor day in the sealed-in world; only the artificial suns that never set. Continuous subjection to the ultra-violet and visible rays of the vast lighting system was necessary to

the growth and reproduction of the plant life that was so essential in keeping the atmosphere breathable.

Tommy had forgotten everything save his interest in the mechanism of the car. He and Dantus were fast friends already.

Chin in hand and eyes avoiding the pain of mourning in Tiedus' fixed gaze, Carson lost himself in gloomy meditation. As he thought back over the events of the past few days he could scarcely believe they had actually occurred or that he was sitting here in a mystery car, speeding through the rank atmosphere of an enclosed world a half billion miles from his own. Home seemed incredibly remote and desirable just then, and the future dark and forbidding.

CHAPTER V

The Trita Ana

BEFORE the car came to a stop Tiedus rummaged in a locker and stretched forth his hands as if carrying something delicate and fragile.

"It will be necessary for you to put this on," he said: "it will be unsafe otherwise."

Blaine stared, mystified. Was this Rulan kidding him? "Put what on?" he asked.

"A thousand pardons. I had forgotten that you do not know. I hold in my hands a cloak, an invisible thing that will hide you from the guards and from the Zara's crystal. Another secret of my father's. Dantor developed it for him only recently."

Blaine felt the texture of the stuff then; crumpled it in his fingers as its gossamer-like weight dropped in loose folds around his body. But there was nothing there to the eyes. It simply did not exist except to the touch, and he felt no different with it on than he had before.

"Where's Tommy?" he asked suddenly, seeing that Dantus now sat alone at the controls.

Tiedus laughed. "He has been covered in the same manner," he said, "and is safely hidden from sight as are you."

Incredulous, disbelieving, Blaine called out to his friend in a tremulous voice. And Tom Farley's awed response reassured him.

"Keep close to me," Tiedus told him. The car had stopped and he directed them into the basket of the lift. The two Earth men collided violently and, clinging to each other in their ghastly invisibility, laughed crazily for a moment. As far as any observers might know there were only the two Rulans in the basket.

BLAINE fingered Pegrani's ray pistol when the cable lowered them swiftly to the roof of a huge steel cylinder that rose, a solitary and unlovely structure, in the midst of the jungle a thousand miles from Ilen-dar. The indicator informed him that seven energy charges still remained in the storage chamber of the little weapon. Its possession brought him a measure of confidence.

Careful scrutiny of the roof had shown it to be deserted, so the basket was brought to rest in a deeply shadowed portion. Immediately they stepped out, and it was sent swiftly aloft by remote control of a portable ether-wave that Dantor produced.

They encountered two of the green-bronze guards in one of the passages below and these challenged the Rulan lads with drawn pistols. The alarm was out! Fortunately Pegrani had not recognized Tiedus or all would have been lost. But the Zara was watching every Rulan community and had instructed her guards to take the Earth men into custody at all costs. Those remark-

able cloaks were all that saved them. They breathed easier when the guards passed on.

Now they were in a lift, dropping speedily into the depths of the Tritu Anu. When the cage came to rest they were hustled into a maze of winding passageways that led ever downward. A wall of damp stone finally blocked their progress, but at Dantus' touch of a hidden spring a section of the solid rock swung aside to admit them to a concealed room where the lights were bright and where a delegation of Rulans awaited their coming.

With the cloaks of invisibility removed, they were welcomed by Dantor, a tall white-haired Rulan who was startlingly like his son.

They were a solemn lot, these Rulans of the older generation, but they gazed on the Earth men with sympathy and understanding. An entirely different breed from the Llotta.

This room was a secret laboratory, fully equipped for chemical and physical research. Dantor sat before a smaller replica of the Zara's crystal ball as he addressed the visitors.

"NO doubt you are puzzled," he began, using the language of the Llotta with an accent that softened its harsh gutturals, "over the calamity that has befallen you. And it is not to be wondered at. But your own danger is as nothing compared with the danger that now threatens our whole solar system. It is to explain that and to ask your cooperation in warding off the holocaust that I have sent for you.

"Since the destruction of the Tritu Nogaru we Rulans number less than one thousand, of whom three hundred are here. The Tritu Anu is foremost of the royal laboratories of Llotta-nar and its work is carried out entirely by our people. It is only on account of our superior accomplishments in science that the Llotta have allowed us to exist for so long a time, and, in this connection, I might say that the Zara has been taken severely to task for her wanton massacre of the Rulans of the Tritu Nogaru. But that is neither here nor there; it is merely a sidelight I am giving you.

"The important thing is this k-metal of yours and its relation to the plans of the Llotta. Antrid, as you know, is a dying world; coming rapidly to the end of its resources. And, as our ancestors did before us, the Llotta have been casting their eyes about for a new home. The inner planets beckoned, especially your Earth, but it was manifestly impossible to reach them as there is insufficient fuel in all Antrid to provide for the voyage of even one space ship. Then, with the long range searching rays of the crystal ball television and sound reproducers, they discovered the use of this k-metal. The sending of Antarzo to your Earth followed.

"The rest you know insofar as his activities are concerned, but what you do not know is this: The Llotta have constructed a huge steel tube that is set deep into the crust of Antrid; an enormous rocket-tube if you please, like one of those on your space ship. They plan to use the energy of this supply of k-metal in setting up tremendous streams of electronic discharges from the great tube and thus to swing the satellite from its natural orbit. They would send this entire world hurtling through space toward the inner planets, and, by proper control of the rocket discharges, bring it close to your Earth where it would become a secondary satellite at close range. Then they could war on you at their leisure and finally take Earth as their new home. Thus have the Llotta planned."

"What!" Blaine exclaimed. "Why, we'd blast them from the skies be-

fore they were started. They haven't a chance."

DANTOR nodded gravely. "I am sure of it," he agreed: "I have seen your great guns in the crystal. But they are blind to that possibility. And there are other serious flaws in the plan. The incentive, of course, lies in the certain knowledge that we are using up the internal heat of Antrid so rapidly that less than a century of life now remains to its peoples. Our power is produced by admitting water to the interior through myriads of tubes that serve the double purpose of introducing the water and conveying the generated steam back to the surface, where it produces electricity by driving great turbine generators. This electricity is distributed by charging the copper shell and the ground beneath at high frequency; it is collected from the air between by the heaters and various machines that use it. But the shortage is ever more serious and Antrid is cooling off. Thus the need for the k-metal and thus the sending of Antarra. And now for the flaws:

"The Zara, in killing Antarro, frustrated her own plans, as he alone, of all her people, knew how to use this marvelous energy producer. Realizing this, she set about to make friends with you two in the hope that the information might be obtained from you. That was a great mistake and raised an unexpected obstacle."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Blaine exploded. "No wonder she tried her wiles on me. Tried to make a sucker out of me, didn't she?"

Dantor smiled knowingly. "More about Clyone later," he said. "Actually she is enamoured of you, Carson, and besides she is not really responsible for the mad plan herself. But that tale can wait.

"The basic and most serious flaw in the plan is this: It can not possibly succeed, no matter how successful their attempts. What they do not understand and will not believe when I tell them is that the only result of the mad experiment will be the complete destruction of the solar system, Antrid and themselves included. Complete and horrible annihilation, I say!" Dantor paused and eyed his visitors solemnly.

IN his mind's eye, Blaine could not visualize such a thing nor picture the possible explanation. But he saw that Tommy had paled and was clenching his fists. Tommy was more of a scientist; it must be be realized what this enterprise involved.

Dantor was speaking again, in low, intense tones: "What they are refusing to see is that the delicate balance of the solar system will be disturbed if a body as large as Antrid is moved a half billion miles sunward. All bodies are kept in their orbits by a nice balance of mass attraction and centrifugal force; if a single one is altered all others are affected. What would happen is easy to calculate. First off, when Antrid approached the inner planets all bodies in the system would change their paths and the altered forces would cause severe earthquakes, tidal waves and other natural disturbances of disastrous extent.

"These would increase in violence as Antrid drew nearer to the sun, and, if she finally took up her position as a new satellite of the Earth, the entire solar system would be in chaos. By this time, even if life still remained on Earth, it would quickly become extinct, for the vastly increased tidal forces on that body would flood the land to the peaks of the highest mountains. Earth would draw in closer to the sun due to loss of velocity and in-

creased mass of the Earth-moon system. Tremendous new forces would rend asunder the Earth, its moon, and Antrid. Venus and Mars, following suit as the forces equalized, we would have a dead universe."

TOMMY believed him. That was apparent from his furrowed brow and grim set jaw. "I'll never give 'em the secret of the k-metal," he grated. "Nor will Carson; I'll gamble on that. We'll die here before they'll get it out of us."

Blaine seconded his remarks fervently. Then, turning to the Rulan scientist, "Perhaps," he suggested, "we might remain in hiding here for an indefinite period. Perhaps even we might contrive a way of getting to the store of k-metal and regaining possession of it. They'd be licked for sure then."

Dantor beamed. "That is exactly why I sent for you," he said. Then sobering anew, he added, "But I fear that would not be the end. They will not give up. Another emissary would be transmitted to duplicate Antarzo's exploit on Earth and in five of your years the danger would again be faced. They would take infinite precaution to prevent a second failure. We must make it forever impossible—now."

"How can we? My God, it's hopeless!" Blaine groaned.

"Nothing is hopeless, my boy. Consider the plight of the Rulans. No, there is still hope and we will leave you to think it over—if you are willing. It is necessary that we Rulans show our faces above before we arouse the suspicions of the guards."

"Of course we're willing. We'll stay as long as you say—and help." Blaine was intensely earnest and Tommy chimed in with his old time fervor and enthusiasm. But hope of success seemed remote.

A murmur of approval came from the assembled Rulans, and Dantor wiped a trace of moisture from his tired old eyes. "Thank you," he said simply. "This chamber is insulated from the searching rays of the crystal spheres. You are safe for the present and will be supplied with everything you need. And I shall return shortly to discuss the matter in further detail."

THE two Earth men were alone then, in the uncanny silence of the underground retreat, regarding each other with awed comprehension. What patient, hopeless creatures these Rulans were! Knowing they were doomed, and without thought of their own safety, they were bending their every effort to the impossible task of saving the universe from the madness of the Llotta.

"What do you know about that?" Tommy said, after a while.

"It's true, what he said?" Blaine asked. "What would happen to our world, I mean—and to the rest?"

"Not a question of doubt. He's doped it out to a T. Smart guy, this Dantor."

"What do you think? Is there a chance? Think—"

"Hush!" Tommy interrupted him. "Didn't you hear something?"

The silence was ghastly; depressing. Blaine heard distinctly the beating of his own heart.

Then it was there again, that sound—a muffled scream from the other side of the stone door. A woman's scream of desperate entreaty. A shuddering, long-drawn moan, trailing off into deathly silence.

CHAPTER VI

Ulana

BLAINE was tugging at the lever he had seen the Rulans use in opening the stone door from

the inside. Tommy, less excited, tried to press one of the invisible cloaks into his free hand.

"Here," he begged. "Don't be a damn fool! They'll get you, the devils."

But the great block of stone was swinging already and the young pilot squeezed through and into the passage. He stumbled over the crumpled figure of a young girl and into the arms of one of the green-bronze guards.

Recovering instantly, he prodded the big fellow's ribs with the ray pistol. "Stick 'em up!" he snarled. Then, realizing the words were meaningless to the other, he said, "Raise your hands—above your head! That's right. Stand still now, or I'll use the ray."

The guard, his face ghastly in the dim light, obeyed. But his wary eyes never left Blaine's for an instant.

A short way down the hall was the body of a young Rulan. Blaine shuddered as he saw it was headless. The ray had nearly missed that time, its energy spent before complete disintegration was effected. The girl lay still at his feet. With quick fingers he frisked the guard, finding his ray pistol and one gas grenade. What was he to do with the big fellow? He ought to let him have it, but somehow he couldn't.

Tommy was in the passageway then, invisible. The big guard stifled an amazed cry as his husky voice came out of the nothingness. These devils of Earth men! They had worked their evil magic on the Zara: had she not ordered that their lives be spared? And now there was this! His thoughts were written large on the ordinarily expressionless countenance, and Blaine was tempted to laugh at his affrighted dismay.

"Come on, you bonehead," Tommy was saying in English. "Bring the big bum inside. I'll carry the girl. Hurry; there'll be a million of them in a minute."

The girl's huddled figure was raised by unseen hands. Poised in mid-air for a moment, it floated joggily, unsteadily through the crack of the partly opened stone door. The guard, wide-mouthed and staring, muttered supplication to the war gods of Antrid.

SAFELY inside the secret chamber, the Earth men made haste to truss up the guard and gag him. He was as tractable as a child under the invisible fingers of Tom Farley, with eyes imploring the evil spirits for mercy. And when Tommy's head appeared, drifting, unsupported by a body; to be followed by arms and shoulders that seemed to materialize from nothingness, the big fellow struggled panic-stricken in his bonds, shaking with superstitious terror.

Blaine straightened the girl's limbs where she lay on a low couch. She was breathing in low shuddering gasps, but a swift examination assured him she had not been harmed. Her beautifully chiseled ivory features were fixed in an expression of nameless dread. A mass of red-gold hair tumbled in confusion about her face and shoulders and when the pilot smoothed this back his heart did a most peculiar flip-flop. Sort of jumped into his throat and stuck there. This Rulan maiden was a vision of feminine loveliness if there ever was one: a dream.

Tommy watched him with a cynical smile, and said with mock contempt. "So you're the guy who swore you'd never tangle up with a femme! Just a month ago, too. Now look: first you get this Zara woman all het up over you, and now this one's got you all het up over her. You make me sick!"

There was no fitting retort. Be-

sides, this thing that had come to him was too serious; too big. He couldn't kid about it—even with Tom. Why, he'd always pictured this very girl in his thoughts; had always dreamed of meeting her some day. And here she was: a living, breathing reality. She was stirring, too, now; breathing easier. Her eyes opened wide; frightened, innocent ones like a child's, blue-gray and fringed with long lashes that raised dewy from the smooth ivory of her cheeks.

"ANTIUS, my brother," she exclaimed, remembering, "where is he? I saw—I thought—and the guard; he wanted to take me—oh!"

Hands fluttering to cover her face, she was sobbing now, and Blaine raised her in his arms, clumsily attempting to comfort her.

"Your brother," he said gently; "I'm afraid the guard did away with him. He is no more."

"Y-yes. I remember now; I saw." She shuddered and became still, her tousled golden head somehow finding a comfortable hollow beneath Blaine's shoulder.

And then, bravely, she sat erect and faced him. "I—I suppose I shouldn't feel so badly," she said. "We always expect it. But I was so fond of him, and he was the last. I am alone now."

"Not alone," said Blaine; "you have me—us, that is. We are the Earth men, you know. And you are safe here."

"You are Carson?" she inquired.

"Yes, and my friend is Farley. That is how your people address us, but we had rather you call us Blaine and Tommy."

Tom Farley was grinning like an idiot. Didn't he have any more sense? Blaine thought. The girl would think he was making fun of her.

"I am Ulana," she said simply.

The stone door opened silently and Tiedus slipped in, closing it swiftly behind him. He stared at the girl and at the trussed-up figure of the guard.

"So!" he exclaimed; "this is the explanation." He breathed heavily as if he had run a long way, and his face was flushed with excitement.

"Why? What's wrong?" Blaine sensed a calamity.

"The Zara—she must have seen you in the crystal. She is in a murderous rage and has visited her wrath on the Tritu Anu. Even now Dantor is on his way to Ilen-dar in answer to her summons."

"Tiedus! I'm sorry. It is my fault entirely, but—but we heard Ulana cry out."

"You did quite right, Carson. I should have done the same myself. And actually it makes little difference as far as we Rulans are concerned. We had not long to remain in this life, anyway. It is only that your hiding place might be revealed; that our plans to outwit the Llotta will fail."

"You—you think she will make away with Dantor?"

"No; he is too valuable as a scientist. But the guards are awaiting her orders to repeat what happened in the Tritu Nogaru. She depends on the work of this laboratory a great deal, though it may be she will stay her hand."

HE was fussing with the controls of the small crystal as he spoke, and it sprang into life with the peculiar shifting milkiness. Then, clearly, they were looking into the council chamber at Ilen-dar. Clyone was there, pacing the floor. Dantor had just arrived with two of the green-bronze guards. The Zara, though nervous, was curiously calm and polite in her greeting of the aged scientist.

"Dantor," she said, "I want these Earth men."

"I can not produce them, Your Majesty."

"You will not, you mean." Clyone dropped her voice. "For two reasons, Dantor, I must have these Earth men. And they must not be harmed. We need them on account of this k-metal that was brought by Antazzo, whose ugly body I so foolishly destroyed."

"Two reasons, you said, oh Clyone?" Dantor smiled knowingly.

"Yes, two!" said the Zara defiantly. "I love this Carson, if you must know. And it is the only influence for good that ever has come into my life, Dantor. Oh, can't you see? I must have them."

Blaine felt the hot blood mount to his temples. Tommy giggled like a moron. And Ulana drew away, ever so slightly, it was true, but still it was a definite withdrawal. Damn this leopard woman, anyway!

"He is not for you, oh Clyone," Dantor was saying. "To people of his world the very thought of such a woman as yourself is repulsive. A murderess he would call you! Their reactions to the taking of human life are entirely different from those of the Llotta. They are —you will pardon my saying it— more like those of the Rulans. The Llotta hold life cheap; they hold it dear. To your people you are not a bad woman; only a foolish one who sometimes, in the heat of passion, upsets their plans by the sudden snuffing out of a life that is valuable to those plans. Do you not see my point? He is different; to him you are the wickedest woman whom he has ever encountered—a monster."

THIS was strong talk. Blaine drew a quick breath, anticipating another of her black rages and sudden death for poor old Dantor.

But Clyone suddenly was on her knees before the old scientist, pleading with him! Creature of strange caprices! Though humanlike in her emotions when in her softer moods, she was more like the feline to which Blaine had likened her, when those soft moods had passed.

Somewhere overhead, in the chambers of the Tritu Anu, there was the sound of a muffled explosion. Its shock was felt even here in the rock-hewn secret apartment. Tiedus went white. Quickly he manipulated the controls of the crystal sphere.

"It can't be," he exclaimed. "The guards would not disobey her, and she has ordered no action."

Swiftly, then, the searching ray of the apparatus swung back to the Tritu Anu itself, boring into the vast structure above them. One of the chemical laboratories was completely wrecked; maimed and dying Rulans were everywhere in the ruins. And those who staggered to their feet were shot down by the green-bronze guards who stood at the doorway.

Then, floor after floor was revealed in the all-seeing crystal. Everywhere it was the same. Merciless, cold-blooded destruction of the Rulan scientists, the most valuable of all in the Llott scheme of things. The Earth men were speechless with horror. Ulana once more buried her head in Carson's shoulder, moaning helplessly.

The scene shifted again to the council chamber of the palace in Ilen-dar. The Zara had not risen from her knees; she was still pleading with Dantor. She knew nothing of the massacre.

"Ianito!" Tiedus gasped. "It must be he."

AND once more the view was changed. They were in the huge dome through which they had entered this mad world. Near the base of the great telescope a bullet-headed Llott was gazing into the

depths of one of the crystal spheres, watching the carnage in the Tritu Anu and shouting his orders to the guards. "Slay, slay, slay!" he yelled. "Not a Rulan shall remain in all Antrid. It is Ianito commanding you, Ianito the Great, master of our destinies, Dictator Supreme. Let not one escape; I command it. Then will come the great day of release; of conquest. A new home, a new world awaits you for the taking."

"It is as I thought," Tiedus groaned: "it is the end. He has taken things in his own hands at last."

The sphere went blank at his touch of a lever. His shoulders drooped and he spread his hands in a gesture of resignation.

"What in the devil!" Tommy exploded. "Can this guy overrule the Zara? Is he that powerful?"

"He is actual ruler of the world that is Antrid; the power behind the throne. Clyone must do his bidding. He has seen that she is softening and resolved to speed things up himself."

A sudden bedlam could be heard in the corridor outside the stone door. This Ianito had gone the Zara one better. He had located them; probably saw the capture of the guard and the rescue of Ulana on the very spot where his minions now hammered for entrance.

"They will take you!" Tiedus whispered. "There is no doubt as to the orders issued by Ianito. They will take you alive and bring you to him. You will be compelled to yield the secret of the metal that energizes."

"Not on your life! We'll refuse." Blaine was very positive.

Tiedus smiled sadly. "There is the pink gas, you know," he reminded him. "No, Carson, there is but one way. You must go out into the jungle and hide for a time. Dantor will return later; it is certain he will be spared. And he will contrive some way of outwitting them. Come; there is a passage."

Blaine saw the wisdom of the argument. It was their only chance. There was a blast that shook the ground beneath their feet, and a huge section of the stone door was blown into the room. He drew Ulana close with a possessive encircling arm.

THEY were in a dark narrow passage now, following the whispered voice of Tiedus. It was damp and rankly odorous there in the darkness, and slimy things wriggled over the floor, brushing their ankles clammily. Behind them there was the roar of another explosion and the shouting of angry voices. The guards were in the secret chamber and hot on their trail.

Tiedus was fumbling with something ahead of them where they had halted; something that rattled and clanked and finally came free. A door opened into the deep-shadowed green of the jungle.

"Go now, quickly," he warned them. "Hide yourselves as far in as you dare go. You will be lost, but will later be directed by a mental message from Dantor. I shall advise him from the spirit world. We do that, you know, we Rulans. But I must leave you now; I must hold back the guards to give you time. Go, friends; farewell."

In his hand Tiedus held the ray pistol they had taken from the captured guard. He would account for a few of the Llotta at least. Blaine reached for him to restrain him; it was unthinkable that this fine lad should sacrifice himself for them. But Tiedus was gone; he had slipped away into the black depths of the passageway.

"Come on, snap into it!" Tommy grated, his voice brittle with suppressed emotion. "The kid's right; let's go." He pushed his way into the matted growth of the jungle.

Holding Ulana close and not daring to look into her eyes lest he should see what he knew was there, Blaine followed his friend. The mysterious depths of the pale green forest closed in about them.

CHAPTER VII

In the Jungle

THEY had progressed not more than twenty paces into the dense undergrowth when the gleaming wall of the Tritu Anu was entirely hidden from view. The artificial sunlight seeped through the mass of vegetation overhead, a ghostly green twilight that made death masks of their faces. But of the lights themselves, of the great latticed columns, of the enormous sponge-like blossoms of the upper surface of the jungle sea, nothing could be seen. They were deep in a tangled maze of translucent flora that was like nothing so much as a forest of giant seaweed transplanted from its natural element. The moss-like carpet beneath their feet was slushy wet and condensed moisture rained steadily from the matted fronds and tendrils above. The air they breathed was hot and stifling; laden with rank odors and curling mists that assailed throat and head passages with choking effect.

Weird whisperings there were from above and all about them. It seemed almost that the uncanny, weaving green things were alive and voicing indignant protest over the intrusion of the three humans.

Ankle deep in the rain-soaked moss, their clothing drenched and steaming, they pressed ever deeper into the tangle. All sense of direction was lost.

"Guess we'd better rest now," said Blaine, seeing that Ulana was gasping from her exertions. "They'll never trail us here."

"How about this crystal thing—the searching ray?" Tommy ventured.

"It can not follow us," the girl explained. "Certain juices of the plants provide an insulator against the ray. In fact, it was an extract of these that was used in protecting the underground laboratory we just left. We are safe now and I am very tired."

So that was the reason Tiedus had been so certain they would be safe in the jungle! Blaine had wondered about that searching ray, and now Ulana's statement had stilled his doubts. Poor kid—she was all in! Her shoulders drooped and she leaned on his arm for support. His conscience troubled him for having forced the pace in the difficult footing. They need not have come so far in.

A GLINT of light through the close packed stems caught his eye; something phosphorescent it was, shining there in the green twilight. A giant mushroom! Towering seven feet from the ground, the great umbrella-like top was aglow with sulphurous light on its under side. And, beneath its ten foot spread, the mossy carpet was dry. An ideal shelter. Here Ulana might find the rest she so sorely needed, and in comparative comfort.

She curled up beside the huge stem and, half buried in warm, dry moss, immediately fell asleep. The Earth men sat gazing solemnly at each other; speechless. In the dim distance the roar of a monorail car rose faintly at first, then grew louder and louder, only to fade away once more into the whispering silence. A steady patter of jungle rain drummed on the mushroom top.

"God!" Tommy muttered, after a while. "I'd give my right eye for a cigarette."

"Me too." Blaine was hugging his knees, nodding drowsily. "A nice

rare steak with mushroom sauce wouldn't go so bad, either," he drawled.

"Aw, have a heart. I'm so sick of these vitamin pills of theirs I never want to see one again."

"Yeah, but they're better than nothing. We haven't any of those even."

"Say!" Tommy jumped to his feet in sudden remembrance. "I saw a bush, back there about fifty feet, with bunches of big red berries on it. Like grapes, they looked. May be good to eat."

"Sure, they *may* be. And then again they may be poison. We can't take any chances like that. Leave 'em alone."

TOMMY growled unintelligibly and fell to walking around their shelter with nervous strides, keeping just within the dry area and glaring savagely into the steaming jungle. Blaine smiled grimly. Nerves! Tommy always was like that; always had to be on the go and doing something. His own nerves were jumpy to-day. They were in hot water this time, for sure. Had to keep on though; they were still alive, or at least half alive; and the solar system was intact as yet. If only Tom Farley would quit his infernal tramping!

"Cut it out!" Blaine snapped peevishly. "You'll have us both bughouse. Can't you sit down and take it easy?"

Tommy stopped in his tracks. "Sorry, Blaine," he said. But he remained standing, staring off into the jungle. Then, suddenly he exclaimed, "Say, I'm going for some of those grapes, or whatever they are. I'll bring a mess of them back and we can wait till Ulana wakes up. She'll know whether they're poison or not."

"Oh, go ahead. But don't get yourself lost. Yell out if you can't find us and I'll answer."

"Okay. Don't worry about me." And in three steps Tommy was swallowed up in the undergrowth.

Blaine stole a glance at the girl and something caught at his throat. God, she was beautiful! There must be some way of getting her out of this mess. Dantor, perhaps, might show the way. He ought to be sending that message soon—a mental one, Tiedus said. Poor kid, Tiedus; gone to the happy hunting grounds now, no question of that. And he intended to advise Dantor from the spirit world. As simple as that, it was. They were game, these Rulans. Fatalists, though, and resigned to the inevitable; hopeless. But a wonderful people in a rotten world.

Soon he felt his head droop and in a moment he began to doze.

When he awoke it was to the touch of Ulana's soft fingers on his arm. "We are alone?" she asked.

"Lord!" he exclaimed, rising stiffly and rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "How long have I napped? I shouldn't have."

A swift look around the small clearing disclosed the fact that Tommy was missing. He shouldn't have let him go. A sudden panic gripped him.

"Tommy! Tommy!" he called out.

THERE was not even an echo in reply. Only the whispering of the jungle overhead and all around them. His friend was gone.

"Ulana," he said, his voice trembling, "we *are* alone. Farley is lost; swallowed up in this terrible forest."

And then, suddenly, she was in his arms. Those wondrous blue eyes, swimming in tears, looked into his own. Soft red lips, upturned, met his lips; clung there.

"I am sorry, my Carson," she said softly, when he had released her: "sorry that your good friend is lost. But perhaps," more brightly—"he has but strayed away. When the mental message comes you will be

reunited. He will hear it as well as you."

Blaine shook his head. In his own heart he knew he would never see Tommy again. He had wandered too close to the Tritu Anu and had been overpowered by the green-bronze guards. Their ray pistols—he shuddered at the thought.

"I have you now, my Carson," the girl was saying. "Only you."

In a daze of pain and happiness intermingled, he knew he was holding her close, drawing her fiercely to him. And then, raising dull eyes to stare over the precious head and into the jungle that hid his friend, he froze with horror.

A flat serpent head with wide slavering mouth and beady eyes swayed there directly behind her. Pendant, it was, on a scaly and slimy length of undulating body that coiled high above in the matted growths of the jungle. As he watched, rooted to the spot, the great head drew back and poised, vibrating, ready to strike.

IN one quick movement he flung the girl aside and whipped out the ray pistol he had taken from Pegrani. He pressed the release and a whirring sound came from the little weapon. But no crackling blue flame sprang forth to blast this creature into nothingness. Jumping aside, he was thrown to the ground by its lashing body as the great snake struck and missed.

But the pistol was useless. Short circuited by moisture, no doubt. He crouched there, calling huskily to Ulana. She must run for it; force her way into the thick undergrowth where the thing could not reach her. She lay there, helpless with terror. Then, in a flash, she was on her feet dashing to his side. God, the huge head was poised there again! Pulsating! The glittering avid eyes upon them!

Instinctively Blaine raised the pistol just as the head darted downward. The release clicked home. And, wonder of wonders, the blue flame crackled spitefully. Exploding atoms, dazzling in the green twilight. Mighty thrashings of the huge coils high up in the tangled foliage. Crashing and tearing of great stems and rope-like tendrils. But the enormous body was headless; a dead thing in the throes of its final reflexes. Only the one charge had been spoiled; the little pistol had served them well.

He drew Ulana into the thickest of the undergrowth for protection against the tremendous lashing thing that crashed into the small clearing where the giant mushroom grew. Their shelter was destroyed. He must find another; he must be forever on guard over this girl whose hand clung so confidently to his own as they wedged their way into the thicket.

"Carson! Ulana!" A familiar voice rose above the whisperings of the jungle. A voice familiar, yet unreal; supernatural; a calm, commanding one that did not sound but echoed only in the consciousness.

"Hark!" Ulana gripped his hand more tightly. "Did you hear? It is Dantor. The message Tiedus promised."

In awed silence they waited. A tiny ball of orange fire flamed suddenly in the depths of the rushes directly before them. A sign!

"Ah, you are there!" the voice broke in. "I have your mental reactions. You will follow the orange beacon to the Tritu Anu where I await your coming. Be of good cheer, my children."

WHAT magic was this? The science of the Rulans was beyond the comprehension of the Earth man. Here was telepathy in its most perfect form. Communications from the spirit plane; the orange flame—it was all so utterly

fantastic that Blaine had to look earnestly at the girl to assure himself it was not a dream. She smiled confidently.

And the orange flame was moving off into the undergrowth. They must follow its beckoning, flickering light.

It was a nightmare, that journey back through the jungle to the Tritu Anu. Dantor must be in a fearful hurry, for the orange flame moved swiftly. If they stopped a moment to rest it danced there impatiently, then receded into the green shadows until they were forced to follow for fear of losing it. Ulana's light robe was torn and sodden with moisture. The perfectly rounded ivory shoulders, bare now, were scratched and bleeding from contact with thorny protuberances that covered some of the lighter reed-like stems.

But the brave girl was uncomplaining. She clung doggedly to the Earth man's hand when they were able to walk erect; followed swiftly and unquestioningly when they were compelled to crawl or wriggle through an almost impenetrable thicket.

Once she cried out in alarm and Blaine turned back to see that the wiry tendrils of a spiny, globular plant had wound themselves around her slim body and held her fast. As he grasped her hand to draw her away, others of the tendrils curled about his wrist and he too was imprisoned. They burned the flesh, those writhing things, and tugged mightily. Ulana screamed with the pain of the many that held her in their tightening grasp.

IT was alive, this thing that grew there, a huge ball with a thousand stinging tentacles. A carnivorous plant. Even as the realization flashed across his mind he saw that the spiny sphere was opening. Split vertically, the two halves fell apart to disclose the steaming interior whose walls were lined with sharp dagger-like projections a foot in length. And the wiry tendrils were drawing them in!

Almost insane with horror, Blaine released the disintegrating energy of the weapon he still carried in his free hand. Twice he pressed its release and twice the searing blue flame spurted from the glass tube that was its muzzle. Only a few charges remained now in the marvelous weapon but once more it had served them well. The open-mouthed plant monster vanished with the clearing of the blue vapor and the ensnaring tendrils relaxed, falling from their bodies like so many loosened cords. Blaine caught the swooning girl in his arms.

Half carrying her, he struggled on after the orange flare. The base of one of the latticed supporting columns loomed vast in the eery twilight gloom, and he leaned a moment against one of its vine-wrapped members. The girl was exhausted and hung limp in his circling right arm. Still the orange beacon danced on. If only Dantor would ease up a bit. Couldn't he give them a little time?

ON and on he staggered, ploughing through the sloppy footing and the dripping clinging greens that were everywhere in his path. Slimy fronds wrapped themselves around them, impeding his progress; clinging as if they too were alive. The whispering silence closed in on them, vast and mysterious. Menacing; awful. . . .

And then he stumbled against a metallic wall. The curved side of the Tritu Anu! His brain cleared and courage returned with a rush. The tiny orange flame danced merrily, leading him along the wall toward the door he knew was there.

Breathing easier now, his pace quickened as Dantor's guiding light

slithered along the gleaming wall. Sometimes it was almost hidden from sight by the curvature of the welded plates and he was forced into a jog trot to keep it in view.

Grimly, tenderly, he clung to the delectable creature whose soft body drooped against him.

The door! The selfsame passage through which they had escaped opened before him. Grateful even for this doubtful protection, he crossed the threshold and trudged wearily along with his precious burden. Blindly trusting in the miraculous powers of Dantor, he followed the orange beacon which now seemed to smile cheerfully as it lighted his way through the winding rock-walled tunnel.

Dazed and spent, he collapsed in the arms of the aged Rulan when he reached the end of the passage.

CHAPTER VIII

Last of the Rulans

BATHED and fed and attired in dry clothing provided by Dantor, the Earth man and Rulan maiden were much refreshed and heartened when, together, they finally faced the aged scientist in the laboratory of the secret apartment. He hadn't allowed them to talk as yet.

Blaine glanced at the ragged opening where the stone door had been blown away. "We are safe from intrusion here?" he asked.

Dantor shrugged expressive shoulders. "The Tritu Anu is empty of life," he said; "a sepulchre. Those of our people who were not completely disintegrated lie blackened corpses in the chambers and corridors overhead. The gas grenades, you know. The guards went to Ianito with Farley and reported you dead, lost in the jungle from which none return."

"Farley!" Blaine shouted. "He is alive?" A wild hope sprang into being, intensified to a certainty as Dantor nodded.

"Why, yes. I thought you knew. They captured him very soon after the escape, but were unable to find you and Ulana. Ianito has mechanized him; he is in a hypnotic state of complete subjection to the Dictator. A quantity of k-metal has been taken to the laboratory at the breech of the great rocket-tube, and Farley now works there with Ianito's crew, initiating them into the mysteries of the metal's uses. Things look very bad."

"Wh-a-at!" Blaine lost his elation over the knowledge that his friend was alive. Tommy was doomed, anyway. They all were doomed. "Why did you bring us back?" he asked, turning away. Blaine felt it was better to have died in the jungle than to face this certainty of lingering torture. Ianito had triumphed; the universe was fated for utter annihilation and Ulana would suffer for weeks, perhaps months, before the final swift dissolution.

UNDERSTANDING. Dantor smiled gravely. "My boy," he said, "we still live, and while we live there is hope. That is the reason I brought you back. Tiedus' message came to me as his spirit left the body and I made haste to come here as soon as the Zara released me and I knew the coast was clear."

"What hope can there be?" Appalled by the enormity of the disaster that threatened the solar system, certain of the ultimate fate that would be meted out to Tom Farley, and convinced of their own helplessness, Blaine was gloomily unenthusiastic.

"That remains to be seen, Carson. I confess it seems impossible of remedy, but the situation must be faced and studied carefully. Insignificant as we are in the vastness of the cosmos, we may yet prove to be the ones to circumvent the mad

plans of the Lietta and prevent the catastrophe which is inevitable if they succeed. We must not give up while we still breathe."

The indomitable spirit of the old scientist glistened in his keen eyes, and he stepped to the controls of the crystal sphere.

"He will not give up, oh Dantor," Ulana exclaimed loyally. "He is with us to the end. Do I speak truth, my Carson?"

Her arm slipped through his and he thrilled anew at her fragrant nearness. Give up? Never! Not with Ulana to fight for. Blaine nodded wordless agreement, silenced by the expression of Dantor's face as the crystal vibrated to a musically throbbing note.

THERE in the crystal ball was pictured a vast underground workshop somewhat like the one in the great dome through which they had entered the copper-clad world. In place of the telescope there was the butt of a gigantic cannon-like tube that towered and was lost in the shadows of the vaulted chamber. Tom Farley, moving jerkily and staring with glazed unseeing eyes, was working there with a cube of the glittering k-metal. In the open breech block of the tube was a heaped-up cone of dry soil, the material they would disintegrate in producing the blast of electronic forces. Blaine groaned as his friend called for the equivalent of a milligram of radium. Though his voice was listless and his movements uncertain, Tommy knew what he was doing and was giving away the secret, powerless to resist the command Ianito had implanted in his completely subjective mind.

"Ah," Dantor breathed; "progressive annihilation of energy; a thing we never have accomplished. You excite ordinary material such as this dry soil by means of atoms exploded from this k-metal which is in turn excited by ordinary radium that can be used over and over as the primary excitant. Am I correct?"

"You are. There are precise ratios of atomic weights to be considered, of course, but it looks as if my friend is being extremely accurate in spite of his dazed condition. Man alive! There is enough material there to provide power for the entire planet Venus for a month!"

"And enough to start Antrid from her orbit," Dantor returned. "Enough to send her on her fatal journey sunward?"

"Only for the first acceleration. A vast amount of energy is needed, Carson, since the gravitational attraction of the planet you call Jupiter is enormous. Antrid will be speeded up in its orbit and the increased centrifugal force will cause it to take up a new and larger orbit where the forces will equalize. Several charges will be required in order to free her entirely from the mother body."

"THERE'S time then!" Blaine exclaimed excitedly. "What can we do to put a stop to the thing? Something to counteract this control by Ianito; to cause Tommy to err in his proportions."

"Yes, that would do it—temporarily at least," Dantor agreed, his brow wrinkled in thought; "and there are the invisible cloaks. It is a bare chance if you want to take it. I can show you the way to this underground laboratory, and, in invisibility, you might even be able to change the ratios yourself. Yes, yes, it is a very good idea." The scientist brightened in renewed hope.

"Of course I'll chance it. When do I start?"

Dantor grinned in appreciation and Ulana looked up at him starry-eyed. "I'm going with you," she stated simply.

"Not on your life! There'll be danger. I won't have it!"

"Nevertheless, I'm going. There's another cloak and besides the danger would be greater if I were alone. Where you go I go, and if you die I die with you—gladly." She twined her fingers with his and gazed at him appealingly.

"Dantor! This can't be!" He turned to the scientist for support.

The aged scientist studied the two a little while, and then said quietly, "I'm afraid it is better as she wishes, Carson. I am unable to protect her, my boy, and there is no one else who might give her shelter. We are the last of the Rulans, she and I. The very last."

"Oh-h!" Ulana moaned, pale and distraught. "All—all are gone?"

"All, my dear. In his rage the Dictator destroyed the Tritu Deanu and the Tritu Raortu when he had finished here. Those were the last settlements remaining, you know. We alone are left behind, Ulana." Dantor bowed his head and the girl sobbed silently.

"Good Heavens!" Blaine Carson was aghast at the revelation. A monstrous deed, this last one of Ianito's. He was a fit master of a world gone mad. A monster in the twisted semblance of human form.

"HE will be searching for you, oh Dantor," the girl said with sudden conviction. She had mastered her emotions and was instantly alert to every angle of the situation.

"That is true," said the old man gravely. "For myself I have nothing to fear, of course. Though insanely jealous of my accomplishments, he maintains an armed truce with me. He dares not do otherwise as the Supreme Council is aware of his shortcomings and cognizant of my superior knowledge of science. But there is danger to you two. You must make haste."

A trembling of the ground beneath them lent added emphasis to his final words. A quick glance into the crystal told them that the initial charge was at work in the huge rocket-tube. The laboratory there at its base was in confusion indescribable, the workmen running hither and yon in the effort to escape the terrific heat that radiated from the red hot breech of the tube. They jammed the exits in their anxiety to be anywhere but near this monster source of energy whose pulsating roar drowned out all other sounds in the vast chamber.

Already Antrid was accelerating in velocity. Her vitals were wrenched and twisted, groaning in protest.

"Quick now!" Blaine was adjusting one of the invisible cloaks for Ulana. He'd *have* to take her with him. And a silent prayer for her safety was on his lips.

Invisible now, and hand in hand, they followed Dantor through the deserted passageways to the lift which carried them quickly to the roof. A drumming sound came to their ears as they stood there looking up into the blackness above the blue-white lights of Antrid. Vibrating to the tremendous roar of the rocket-tube, the copper shell emitted a constantly increasing reverberation that was like a long drawn peal of thunder on Earth or Venus. It was awe-inspiring, that sonorous bombilation; deafening.

DANTOR was fumbling with the mechanisms of the remote control which Tiedus had used in returning the basket lift to the car that had brought the two Earth men from Ilen-dar. Again and again he returned to his manipulations after peering anxiously upward. But the basket did not respond to the call. They were marooned atop the empty shell of the Tritu Anu!

"Carson! Ulana! Where are you?" the aged scientist shouted above the din, his face a tragic mask, his lips compressed with anxiety and disappointment.

They grasped him to reassure him, each taking a hand. Carson, placing his lips close to the old man's ear, inquired anxiously, "What's the trouble?"

"The car does not respond. Something has happened to the motors, probably on account of the vibration. I can do nothing."

And then, piercingly through the thunderings of the copper shell, a voice broke in—Ianito's voice. "Dantor!" it shrieked. "At last I have found you. I need your help immediately. Wait there for the monorail."

Dantor gripped them tightly to enjoin silence. Ianito had located the scientist with the searching ray and was still watching and listening at his crystal. He seemed not to know that Blaine and Ulana were there.

"Very well, oh Ianito. I shall wait," Dantor shouted.

"It is good. There is important work to be done." Ianito's words trailed off into the maelstrom of sound that swirled about them.

"He's cut off," the scientist yelled. "There is but one chance now. You must come with me, depending on absolute silence and your cloaks to deceive them. It is the only way."

ULANA clung to him there in the terrifying bedlam and Blaine's fingers strayed to the comforting butt of the ray pistol. Whatever happened there were a few charges left; blasts of energy that would serve at least to postpone the end for Ulana. Or, if worse came to worst—

The sudden rush of a monorail car high overhead interrupted his thoughts. "Close to me now!" Dantor shouted; "but have a care lest one of them touch you and discover—"

A cable-hung cage dropped swiftly to the roof and they crowded in beside the scientist. Quickly it whisked them aloft to the higher plane.

In the monorail car Blaine held the girl close, and they trod softly as they dodged the guard at the porthole and stepped into the passenger compartment. Two of Ianito's technical experts were there and a crew of at least a dozen of the green-bronze giants. Unseen by any, the couple tiptoed to the farthest corner of the compartment and took seats in a recessed section.

With a quick jerk and the rising whine of motors, the suspended vehicle started back in the direction of Ilen-dar. In earnest conversation with Ianito's engineers, Dantor affected an air of nonchalance that was artfully disarming. The Llotta suspected nothing as the car continued on its way.

And then there came an ominous grinding sound from underneath the very seat occupied by the invisible fugitives. A puff of dense black smoke followed and Ulana coughed spasmodically, uncontrollably. They were coming now, two of the green-bronze ones, to investigate. There was no escape from this narrow space. And—Ulana was gone! She had slipped from his grasp in the coughing fit and he could not find her with his wildly searching hands. Another betraying cough over there. The green-bronze ones were between them. He saw one of them draw back in amazement, then clench his fingers and twist.

The ripping sound of torn material followed and the girl's head and startled face appeared floating there, unsupported, her body and limbs as yet invisible. But they'd found her; she was lost!

CHAPTER IX

Ianito

QUICKLY stripping the protecting cloak from her body, the green-bronze one held the struggling girl gingerly but with a grip of iron. His eyes bulged from their sockets, and the other guard staggered backward with hands outstretched as if to ward off an evil spell that might be cast by this supernatural visitant.

Blaine thrust his arm through the folds of his coat, ray pistol in hand. A crazy laugh forced itself to his lips at sight of the detached member, stretched there, tensed, drifting in mid-air. The pistol prodded Ulana's captor viciously.

"Hands off of her!" the voice behind the lone arm was snarling. "Hands off, or I fire!"

The girl slipped to the floor in a heap as the amazed guard loosed his grip. And, in the same instant, the blue flame spurted. He had not intended to press the release; it was useless anyway to battle the entire outfit. But the blood lust was upon him and a savage joy in the destruction of this beast who had dared lay hands on Ulana impelled him to turn on the other. Blindly he swung, clubbing the pistol and beating in the ghastly face that wabbled there upon the spineless, superstition-bound body.

Others were coming then, hundreds of them it seemed. The pale face of Dantor appeared for an instant in the background, through the red haze that was blinding him. He only knew he was fighting desperately, viciously, and against impossible odds. The satisfying crunch of his left fist against a leering green-bronze face was followed by an excruciating pain as one of his knuckles was driven back. Hardly knowing he had pressed the release of the ray, he was mildly astonished to see that two of the guards were enveloped in the blue vapor. Scintillant tiny sunbursts within the blue. Two less of those devils! His pistol was empty and he flung it into a grinning face; he saw the blood spurt and the face change shape, crushed beyond human resemblance.

He was down then, gasping for breath against the floor plates. The weight upon him was enormous; crushing. If only they'd quit squirming so . . . and pounding . . . reminded him of his old football days . . . some scrimmage!

Abruptly came the blankness of insensibility.

DIMLY at first, in the painful throbbings of returning consciousness, Blaine knew he was in one of the Llott workshops where machines hummed and pounded and where many operatives were busily engaged. A cool hand stroked his aching brow and he opened his eyes. Ulana! They had spared her. Alert on the instant, he was acutely aware of the babbling of voices close at hand. Ianito was there, at the base of the huge telescope, talking with Dantor, his voice raised excitedly. The monorail crew stood by, and he noted with grim satisfaction that several of them were as badly damaged as he could wish.

His gaze returned to the sweet face that bent so near. Weakly he drew the golden head to his breast; held it there a moment, thinking, hoping, planning. Then he sat up on the edge of the low couch on which he had been placed, regarding her anxiously. Evidently they had not harmed her—as yet.

Ianito had dismissed the green-bronze ones and was approaching the couch. Dantor was with him, lagging a little and pressing a finger to his lips; shaking his head gravely to warn them. They must not speak of the plans made in the Tritu Anu; must not talk

The Dictator was regarding them now with hard eyes. But it seemed almost that something of admiration or respect, something of human-like emotion was in his cold stare.

"Hah!" he grunted, at last. "These two are in love, Dantor. It is as you explained. It is good, and fits in with my plans to a nicety. I shall spare the life of the Earth men on account of his knowledge of the inner planets; I can use him later. The girl I shall spare for a different reason, and that fits in with my plans as well."

WHAT did he mean by that last crack, the grinning devil? A sinister intent was there, behind his smooth talk. Blaine half rose from his seat in quick anger, but the girl's gentle touch on his arm restrained him. She depended on him now and he'd have to go easy until the proper time came.

"Impetuous, aren't they?" Ianito was saying. "these Earth men. A characteristic that must get them into much trouble, even in their own world."

Laughing at him, this hell-hound! Blaine gritted his teeth.

The Dictator addressed him directly. "You are a fortunate young man," he drawled sarcastically. "You have slain several of my trusted retainers and by so doing have forfeited your right to life. But Ianito is forgiving. Mechanized, you will be of value to me when the great day comes. And it pleases me that you are so deeply attached to the Rulan maiden; it pleases me greatly."

"Why?" Blaine snapped, a great rage consuming him. Only the pressure of Ulana's fingers held him back. He would have to control his temper or he'd make a mess of things.

"Because, my dear Carson, it will so displease the Zara."

With this cryptic remark he turned on his heel and left them. A number of his technical experts awaited him at the eyepiece of the great telescope.

Dantor whispered swiftly before following him, "Keep up your courage, Carson. A way may yet be found."

The group by the telescope was an excited one. Something had occurred which must be of great moment. It came to Blaine in a flash that the reverberations of the copper shell of Antrid had ceased. The rocket-tube was silent.

"I don't know why we shouldn't be in on this," he said to the girl. "Let's go over there and see what it's all about."

ONE of the astronomers was reporting to Ianito, referring to a sheet of calculations he held in nervous fingers. "Our orbital velocity has increased greatly," he was saying, "and the new path lies at an average distance of eighty-three erds from the mother planet. According to my figures it will require six more charges to free us from her pull and another to redirect us toward our destination."

Eighty-three erds! Practically a million Earth miles. Already they had swung out to a new orbit between those of Ganymede and Callisto. And what of the effect on the other satellites? Blaine listened carefully as the astronomer continued.

"Perturbations in the movements of the other bodies in our own system are marked, and, in the case of the first satellite, have proved disastrous. It has commenced its inward journey and soon will have fallen into the gaseous envelope of the mother body. But this need occasion us no concern; it is small and there will be stabilization of the others after the second charge is fired."

Colossal conceit! What amazing

ignorance or oversight of natural laws! These Llott scientists could see no farther than their snub noses, or at least no farther than the satellite system of Jupiter. And Ianito was complimenting the astronomer on his good work!

The group broke up now and the Dictator turned to the controls of his crystal sphere. Blaine and Ulana caught the view of the underground laboratory at the base of the great rocket-tube.

All was as it had been when they first saw this chamber. The breech of the huge cannon had cooled and its massive block was open. Tommy was there, fishing the radium capsule from the powdery residue in order that it might be used in exciting the next charge. A mechanical precision marked his every motion.

"It is good," Ianito grunted, flicking a lever that cut off the view. "We are progressing nicely, thanks to the generosity of the Earth beings in providing this k-metal."

His sarcastic grin was infuriating. Dantor cast a warning look in the Earth man's direction. It wouldn't do to lock horns with this self-satisfied despot; at any rate, not now. Blaine's mien was expressionless as he faced him.

THE view in the crystal was another familiar one when Ianito made a quick readjustment: the throne room in the palace of the Zara! The Dictator snorted when he saw that Clyone was reclining lazily on her golden couch, submitting graciously to the ministrations of her handmaidens.

"Faithless creature!" he snarled. "Harlot! Parricide! But at last Ianito will have his revenge."

The hate in his voice and in those terrible glass-hard eyes was devastating in its intensity: implacable; relentless. Yet Blaine could not down the exultant feeling that came to him when he saw that this monster could suffer, too.

"What's the matter?" he sneered. "Did she throw you down?" He could have bitten off his tongue as he spoke. Ulana gasped.

And if Ianito had been in a rage before he was a madman now. Despite his contempt of the misshapen creature, Blaine quailed before the murderous glare that answered his rash words. But the Dictator was master of himself, at that; his lips tightened in a thin line and he held his peace. He actually smiled after a moment, the devil, a smile, though, of evil triumph. He turned once more to the crystal and switched on the sound mechanism.

"Clyone," he called, in velvety voice; "it is Ianito."

She looked up, startled, her chalky face gone whiter still. Her jeweled fingers fluttered to the smooth throat.

"I hear you," she replied shakily. "What do you wish of me."

"Nothing much—this time. I have visitors who request an audience with you, oh Clyone. Can you see them at once?"

"Who—who are they?" Her eyes widened at his insinuating tone.

"An Earth man—Carson—and the Rulan maiden who is to become his mate." Ianito chuckled evilly as he watched her expression.

"Carson?" she whispered, her wild eyes softening. "He—he lives?" Black hatred replaced the wondering joy that had glowed in her face. She was thinking of the statement regarding the Rulan maiden. "Why, yes," she snapped, suddenly very much alert; "I can see them. Send them immediately."

The Dictator chortled as he switched off the power. Dantor paled and looked away. So this was his scheme! He was sending Ulana to certain death at the hands of the leopard woman. Blaine bit his lips

until they bled. If only he had one of their ray pistols again. If he had—

IANITO was at his side, whispering. But he couldn't see him; the devil had donned one of Dantor's invisible cloaks. Something hard pressed deep into his ribs.

"I shall be with you," the Dictator told him, "but she will not know. It is necessary, of course, that I watch over you in order that your deportment be suitable to the occasion. The death ray of Antrid is ready in my hands. Proceed, you and the Rulan maid, and see to it that you give her every attention while in the Zara's presence."

Dantor interposed an objection. "But, Ianito, you promised to spare them. I learned to love these two and want no harm to come their way."

"I keep my promise, oh Dantor. Ianito will not harm them."

"But the Zara"

"What Clyone does is none of my concern. Silence, Dantor; I command it! You will remain here." The voice of the Dictator cut like a knife.

The old Rulan scientist bowed his head and turned away. Good old Dantor! He'd done all in his power to help them. This was the end; not a question of doubt. Blaine Carson drew the Rulan maiden fiercely to him. This Clyone might meet some opposition if she attempted to wreak her spite on Ulana; she *would* meet it. There was no need for Ianito to ask that he pay every attention to the lovely, frightened girl who clung to him so trustingly.

They were in the lift then, dropping swiftly into the palace beneath the great dome that topped Antrid.

"This Clyone," Ulana whispered, "she has great power of enticement, my Carson. I fear for your loss—to me. She will take you from me, and I shall be alone—or dead. Death would be the better."

"Never!" said Blaine huskily. "Never, my dear. She has no power over me; nor will I permit her to bring suffering to you."

Ianito laughed then, an ugly cackle that came out of the unseen.

CHAPTER X

Clyone and Ulana

THE Zara received them in the throne room, alone. Blaine hesitated as he crossed the threshold, Ulana's trembling fingers tightly clasped in his own. The quick prod of the invisible ray pistol warned him that Ianito was at his heels.

Clyone uncurled her sinuous, black-sheathed body and rose to her feet as they neared the dais.

"Welcome, oh Carson," she purred. "Clyone has mourned you as dead, but she mourns no longer. A kind fate has returned you."

The gold-flecked eyes were all for him; it was as if she did not see his companion. Blaine fought the spell of her with all that was in him. He did not reply.

"Come to me, Carson," she pleaded, her lashes lowered. "Leave this Rulan girl and come to me."

"Where I go she goes," he replied firmly.

"Very well then," said the Zara meekly, "bring her with you. I would converse with her as with you."

Something new, this was: a gentleness Blaine had never thought the leopard woman could exhibit, even in sham. And her eyes, when she raised them, still were gentle. She extended a white arm and smiled provocatively. If this was a ruse, if she meant harm to the Rulan maid, her acting was superb. And, from what he had seen of the woman previously, he was almost convinced of her sincerity. A nature like hers was incapable of successful dissimulation. Still, he was suspicious and he

shielded Ulana with his body as they came up to the throne. The Zara studied them in silence for a while. Then she spoke.

"Let me look at you, my dear," she said to the Rulan maiden.

AND Ulana, unafraid, faced her boldly. His muscles tensed, Blaine watched every movement of the Zara's straying fingers. But her gaze was direct and kindly; there was no dissembling here. It was not the same Clyone he had previously known.

"You are very beautiful, Ulana," she said softly. "Do you love this Earth man very much?"

"I do, Your Majesty."

"And you, Carson, you love her—very much?"

His answer was wordless. A sudden lump in his throat choked back the vigorous affirmative and he merely nodded, mute, as he enfolded the slight form of Ulana in his arms.

"Carson—are you sure?" Clyone was pleading, her eyes compelling; tender. Ulana drew away from his arms, waiting.

What had come over the leopard woman? She was a creature of mad vagaries, he knew, and yet this was the most convincing mood he had seen. Despite his knowledge of her past; despite his better judgment, he was drawn toward her. A step, and then quick revulsion of feeling. He recoiled and turned swiftly to Ulana.

Clyone saw and understood. Her tender mood was over in a flash and she crouched there, terrible jealous eyes fixed on the Rulan maiden. She extended a white arm with jeweled fingers, pointing. Blaine swung quickly, brushing the arm aside just as that intangible something flashed from her hand. The energy of the black disks! It had missed Ulana by inches, but crashed home—on something!

A SCREAM of terror rang out in the chamber, and there on the floor a dozen paces from the dais the thing that had been Ianito wriggled under the heap of whirring black things that suddenly covered the invisible form. He wriggled and then lay still as the angry buzzing of the black destroyers rose in triumphant, discordant song.

"Ianito!" the Zara exclaimed, thunderstruck. "He was here?"

"He was," Blaine assured her in an awed voice, "invisible, oh Zara, in a cloak contrived by Dantor, the Rulan scientist." Then blind rage overcame him. She had tried to kill Ulana; before his eyes! "You she-devil!" he roared. "I've half a mind to choke the vile life from your tainted body. Damn you! May the heat devils of Mercury burn and sear and shrivel you in everlasting torment."

She cowered as if he had struck her, and, unaccountably, he was ashamed. Cursing her like a schoolboy and using the language of the lower class Venerians!

"Please, Carson, please," she moaned; "do it. Choke me if you will and release me from my torment. I am yours to do with as you please." Throwing back her proud head, she bared her throat.

Blaine took a step forward, his knees weak beneath him.

"Carson!" It was Ulana, her hand soft on his arm.

He drew the back of his hand across his eyes. This was madness! But was ever a woman so deserving of death? Incomprehensible half-animal creature, she sat there rocking to and fro, waiting.

"No!" he said "No! Only let us go in peace, Clyone. Your sins be on your own head. Your realization of them is punishment enough."

"Wait!" Controlling herself now, she rose once more, and her face was transfigured. Almost it seemed that she was happy. "Wait!" she

repeated. "You are free to go when I have finished, but first Clyone wishes to bid you farewell."

THEY faced her in silent wonderment.

"Ianito is gone," she continued, "and the Llotta are helpless without him, unless I take over their leadership in fact. He was my master, I admit. But Clyone is able to carry on with the plans he conceived; able, but no longer willing. Clyone is abdicating. It but remains for you, Carson, to put a stop to this thing they are doing down there at the great rocket-tube. You can do it, I am certain. Go now; and think not too badly of Clyone when you have gone. Farewell."

With a quick motion she raised her fingers to her lips, then tossed a small vial crashing to the floor.

"Carson—she has taken something," Ulana stifled a hysterical sob as she spoke. "Go to her. It is the least you can do."

Blaine caught the leopard woman in his arms and lowered her gently to the luxurious cushions of the throne she had occupied for so long a time, a queen in name only. Already the gold-flecked eyes were glazing and they begged him piteously.

"Kiss me." Her lips formed the words, but no sound came.

Ulana was there, on her knees and crying. "Carson, you must," she urged him.

The spirit of Clyone, with its great burden of evil and some little of good, left the beautiful body as the Earth man pressed his lips to hers. An unwonted smile, placid and content, wreathed the still features.

The Zara was no more.

STUNNED and shaken by what they had seen, they hurried from the chamber of death. Blaine located the lift and they were quickly carried to the laboratory.

Dantor was there, working with the astronomers, and Blaine drew him aside, whispering the story in his ear in swift disjointed sentences. The aged scientist could scarcely credit his senses.

The thrumming of the copper shell to the energy of the second rocket-tube charge came but faintly to their ears in this place, since the vacuum of outer space surrounded the great domed structure. But the vibration and quakings of the satellite were transmitted to the floorplates on which they stood. They knew that Antrid was swinging ever outward from the mother planet.

"You must do it alone," Dantor was saying; "you and Ulana. I have no control over these Llotta. I am here only on sufferance of Ianito, and Ianito is no more. But they know it not. These in the dome think he is with you now, cloaked in invisibility. The tale of the cloaks has been broadcast. You are safe for the present and can descend to the base of the rocket with impunity. Ianito's name is the password. And here is a ray pistol, fully charged; two of them. He left them in his desk. Go now, quickly."

"The way—how do we get there?" Blaine's fingers closed lovingly over the butts of the pistols and he thrust them in his pockets.

"Oh yes. The lift—the one that carried you to the palace—its shaft ends deep down beneath the natural surface of Antrid in a tunnel where a moving platform will carry you to your friend. May your God and the gods of ancient Antrid be with you."

Once more they were in the cage of the lift, dropping with breath-taking speed. Down into the bowels of the satellite they sped and it seemed the shaft would never end.

THEN they were in the tunnel Dantor had told them about, smooth walls speeding past as the swiftly moving platform carried them on. The great arched chamber opened before them at last and they saw that the workmen were returning to their tasks. The huge breech of the rocket-tube had cooled to a dimly visible red, the second charge having done its work.

Hands in his pockets and walking stiffly as if mechanized, the Earth man presented himself before the guard at the entrance, Ulana pressed close to his side. He feigned the hypnotic state.

"I-an-i-to," he repeated in jerky syllables, acting the part, "he—sent us—with message—for Farley."

The guard grinned. Even here the story of the Earth man and the Rulan maiden was known. The strange leniency of Ianito in permitting them to remain together was the topic of the day. He waved them through with an indulgent gesture. Ianito knew what he was about, and would have his little joke—later.

Tom Farley was there, waiting with the Llott scientists until the breech block should have cooled sufficiently to permit them to open it and prepare the third charge. A flicker of recognition in his glazed eyes told Blaine he was not altogether gone, but Tommy gave no other outward sign. Perhaps with Ianito no longer alive, the mental control would become ineffective.

They had not long to wait, for the breech was water-jacketed and cooled rapidly. Blaine puttered around with unfamiliar test tubes and retorts, watching for a chance to get a word with Tommy in private. He was almost certain that his friend was recovering. Ulana sat there on a greasy bench, regarding the scene with anxious eyes. She was a brick: game as they made them.

Tommy was beside him then, weighing a heap of the dry soil for the next charge. "Are you all right?" Blaine whispered.

But Tom Farley stared back with not a glimmer of comprehension. He was still a victim of the mechanizing process of the Llotta. With a carefully planned but seemingly careless gesture, Blaine slid back the weight on the scale arm. This charge would be short of the proper ratio of dry soil. He wondered what the effect would be.

ONE of the Llott scientists came over then with the radium capsule, and Tommy attached it to the clamp that would hold it in contact with the cube of k-metal. The dry soil was shoveled into the breech block by the unsuspecting Llotta and the thing was ready for the placing of the excitant.

The great breech block swung home and a siren shrieked. All work in the laboratory was suspended and the workmen stood around in expectant silence. Blaine found himself worrying as to the possible result of his tampering.

"I saw you!" Tommy hissed then in his ear. "There'll be hell to pay now. We gotta beat it."

Good old Tommy! He'd recovered after all. He, too, had been shamming at the last. Blaine saw they were unobserved and thrust one of the pistols in his hand.

"Now!" his friend rasped. "Before they get wise. Grab the girl and we'll make a break for the tunnel entrance: over there."

Ulana took in the situation at a glance and was at his side. They moved swiftly in the direction of the entrance through which they had come.

A terrific roar came from the base of the rocket tube and the Llotta broke into excited screechings. Something different about it this time. There was a terrible menacing

note in the jarring thump which preceded the roar. A muffled boom high in the five mile depth of rock strata above them spelled disaster of an unknown and terrifying nature. The breech of the tube was white with heat in an instant of time.

Pandemonium broke loose now and the Earth men were running for the exit to the lift, covering their retreat with brandished ray pistols. Ulana, brave girl, ran alongside, swinging a pinch bar she had picked up, ready to help.

CHAPTER XI

Disaster

THE great crystal sphere on the central pedestal was ablaze with the scarlet warning signal of the Supreme Council. A sonorous voice from its depths boomed out above the clamor.

"Kill them! Kill the Earth men," it roared. "The Zara is dead and Ianito has vanished. Denari has mounted the throne, and it is he who commands you. Kill the traitors!"

But the Llotta and the green-bronze guards needed no command from the new ruler of Antrid. These devils from Earth had tampered with the last rocket-tube charge; probably had caused serious damage to the tube itself. They must die.

Only the guards were armed, and the Llotta swarmed so closely in pursuit of the fugitives that it was impossible for them to use their ray pistols. At the great iron gate that now closed the exit stood the guard who had admitted them. Tommy's pistol spurted blue flame and he was enveloped by the destroying energy.

Ulana screamed as a Llott grasped her, wrenching the iron bar from her hands. Blaine covered the intervening distance in a bound and his fist crashed to the fellow's jaw, snapping back his head and lifting him off his feet. He crashed to the floor plates an inert heap and the Earth man recovered the pinch bar.

Pocketing his pistol, he swung the bar with both hands in mighty circles that took terrible toll of the Llotta. They fell back before the onslaught of the infuriated Terrestrial, leaving eight of theis number dead or dying with crashed skulls and broken ribs and arms.

"OPEN the gate, Tommy," he shouted. "Use your pistol on the lock if you have to." A guard was coming at him and he ducked to the floor as the blue flame crackled, singeing the hair from his head and blistering the scalp as it spent its charge in fusing a cross member from one of the steel columns nearby.

He fired from under his prostrate body and the guard thrashed his arms wildly in the blue mist, then stiffened to a sparkling vanishing figure within the dissipating vapor.

A gas grenade burst at his side and Blaine sprang to his feet, running from the spreading sulphurous cloud. The gate was open and its lock dropped molten metal. Good old Tommy!

The poison gas hid them from their pursuers for the moment and they were through the gate, all three.

"Get back!" Blaine shouted: "the gas!" He held his breath and closed his eyes as he slammed the gate and wedged it with the pinch bar he still carried. That would hold them for a while.

The gas was upon him and his skin flamed scorching hot from the contact. He mustn't breathe; mustn't open his eyes He groped there in the scalding vapor, blindly. Tommy had him by the wrist then, dragging him away. Ulana was calling somewhere there in the dark-

ness. His lungs were bursting. And then he knew the air was pure, and he exhaled the long pent breath noisily, and inhaled deeply.

Eyes smarting and head reeling, he saw Ulana through a haze of dancing smoke wisps he knew were illusory. She was safe, thank God! They were on the moving platform then, on the return side, and his strength was returning. Narrow escape, he'd had, from that lung-rotting gas. Ulana smiled happily when his vision cleared.

THE speeding platform carried them swiftly toward the lift that had brought them down. What if the lift would not operate? This Denari might well have shut off the power or even returned the cage to the upper end of the shaft.

"Boy, oh boy," Tommy was saying. "you sure did gum up the works. Know what happened?"

"Plenty, from the look of things." Blaine smiled grimly.

"I'll say. You cut down the dry soil ratio a third. Not sure of the exact reaction, but the expansion was too rapid. Explosion followed before the air could be driven from the tube. I'll bet the big cannon was wrecked somewhere overhead. Boy, what a blast!"

As if the last sentence were a prophecy, there came a terrific jar that twisted the platform violently from under them. They were thrown headlong and an awe-inspiring rumbling came up from the vitals of Antrid. An earthquake! The tortured satellite could not withstand the strains set up by the tremendous reactive force of the rocket-tube. The lights snuffed out and the platform came to a grinding stop. One of the underground power plants was out of commission and they were trapped here in the stifling darkness.

"Nice fix we're in now!" Tommy grunted where he had fallen.

Blaine, having located Ulana was relieved to find that she was unharmed. "Yes," he said slowly; "but there's one thing sure: they can't follow us here unless they walk."

"Why can't we walk?" Ulana asked with forced cheerfulness. "It isn't far now."

"Oh, we can walk all right; we'll have to. And here's hoping we get somewhere." Tommy, at least, was undaunted so far.

IT was their only chance now. Blaine held fast to the girl as they felt their way along the smooth tunnel wall, and Tom Farley, behind them there in the darkness, kept up a running fire of small talk that was utterly irrelevant. Nothing could keep that Irishman down.

After what seemed like miles of steady plodding they glimpsed a light ahead. They quickened their pace. It was the open door at the base of the shaft, and the cage of the lift was there, fully lighted and waiting. Denari had not shut off the power after all. But of course! It came to Blaine in a flash; this was a private shaft, used by Ianito in his clandestine visits to the palace of the Zara and for his own use in descending to the sub-surface chamber at the base of the rocket-tube. Denari did not even know it existed.

Strange they had not been followed. Surely the Llotta could have forced that gate back there in a comparatively short time. A mass of falling rock, shaken loose by the temblor that cut off their light and stopped the moving platform, must have closed the tunnel.

They were in the cage now, shooting aloft with smooth acceleration. Tommy fidgeted and paced the floor in the narrow confines like a caged animal.

"Lord, man," he said, after a

while, "what I wouldn't give for a cigarette!"

"Is that all you can think of?" Blaine was sarcastic. His own nerves were on edge. They were nearing the upper end of the shaft. "Try to do a little thinking about what's going to happen up there above Ilen-dar. We've got to do some tall figuring and some swift scrapping before we're through."

"Sure." Tommy shrugged his shoulders. "There'll be a lot of fireworks, I guess. But I wish I had a smoke just the same."

Ulana pouted. They spoke in English and she did not understand. But the expression of their faces forced a laugh to her lips, one of those silvery tinkles that caught at Blaine's heart strings. All that mattered now was to see her to safety—and happiness.

THE cage slowed up and came to rest as the automatic control of its gravity energy functioned. The door rolled back and Blaine thrust his head through the opening, pistol in hand.

There on the floor of the corridor that led to the great dome room was a crumpled figure. Dantor! It couldn't be that they had slain him! Blaine was on his knees by the body, raising the blood-smeared head with gentle hands. A deep gash extended from over the right temple up into the scalp and the skull was crushed; a mortal wound. But the doughty heart of the aged scientist still beat on, weakly, but with determination. He opened his eyes and smiled.

"Ah, you have come at last," he sighed. "I have waited here to warn you and advise you."

"Easy now." Blaine straightened the helpless limbs and cradled the drooping head on his knees. Ulana was beside him, bravely holding back the sobs that were in her throat.

"I saw—in the crystal," Dantor whispered. "And Denari struck me down when I expressed relief at your escape. Carson—Ulana—Farley—you can escape if you do as I say. Antrid is doomed; the incorrectly proportioned charge burst the rocket-tube in several places and tore the muzzle asunder where it projected from the copper shell of our world. With the explosion at the muzzle a huge section of the copper casing was blown away and the atmosphere of Antrid is now escaping rapidly into the vacuum of space. . . ."

Dantor closed his eyes and a spasm of pain twisted his features.

Tommy expelled a shuddering breath, solemnly expressive.

THE aged scientist fought off the grim spectre valiantly. He patted Ulana's hand as his weak voice resumed, "You will take care of her I know, Carson. Take her with you to your own world; make her happy." He fell silent once more.

"But how?" Blaine whispered.

"Oh yes, I am forgetting. The side passage—next one on the right—it leads to a storeroom of the oxygen helmets and vacuum-tight suits in which you can step forth from the adjoining airlock. Your space ship is there . . . unharmed. . . . In it you will be able to return . . . and. . . ."

But Dantor's spirit had fled the pain-racked body. Blaine closed his lids and stretched him on the hard metal floor, crossing the thin hands on his breast. Ulana sobbed openly for a moment and then bowed her head in silence.

"The last of the Rulans," Blaine said softly, looking down at all that was mortal of the Rulan scientist.

"No," Ulana whispered, "I am the last, my Carson."

"You'll become a good American, sweetheart," he said gently. "That

is, if we get away from here." There was no time to be lost, at that. At any moment this Denari might find them. "Come," he begged, drawing her from the body, "we must hurry."

Following the passage indicated by Dantor they came at last to an open door. A noticeable draft blew outward and Blaine thought grimly of the scenes that were being enacted throughout all Antrid. The air that made life possible was escaping. And the news broadcasts from Ilen-dar would have notified the entire population by this time. There would be rioting, panics, murder and suicide in the cities of the accursed Llotta and in their subject countries. A frantic effort of the scientists to stop the gap would avail them nothing: it was an impossible task now. The construction of the great shell had been a different matter; there was some natural atmosphere remaining in those days. And, finally, they would suffocate, every last one of them. They'd die miserably, purple of face and with swollen tongues protruding.

THE open door led to a railed-in balcony that looked out over the dome room. Machines still hummed there but the place was deserted save for a few scattered corpses: probably those of the Llotta who had objected when Denari usurped the throne.

A second door opened from the balcony into the store room of the moon-suits. At least these helmeted contraptions resembled the so-called moon-suits used by inhabitants of the inner planets when they visited a body having no atmosphere.

Ulana needed some assistance with the bulky equipment, and then Blaine climbed into another of the suits and locked his helmet. A moment later they were in the air-lock with Tommy, who had attired himself more quickly and was operating the controls.

At the outer hatch they waited until the air pressure reduced to a practically complete vacuum. Their suits distended ludicrously now by the pressure within, they unclamped the hatch and stepped out to the surface of the great copper shell. It vibrated under their feet to the blast from the huge gap that was not five miles distant.

The RX8 was there as Dantor had said, a slim tapered, cylinder that gleamed, a thing of beauty, in the reflected light of Jupiter which now was millions of miles distant. The sun was not visible and the light of the mother planet cast long shadows on the copper plates. Pelting ice particles clattered resoundingly against the metal helmets: frozen moisture from the escaping air of Antrid.

Blaine cried out in surprise; then remembered his companions could not hear him. There were moving shadows over there, four of them, nearing the hull of the RX8. The Llotta had beat them to it. Denari, no doubt, intending to escape with a chosen few of his subjects. He broke into a run through the now blinding hail storm. He would have to head them off; else, Ulana was lost, they all were lost.

CHAPTER XII

The Last of Antrid

TOMMY was running beside him now and Ulana was not far behind. They too had seen the danger. If they could not reach the vessel ahead of the Llotta; would not fight them off and gain possession, it was all off. They'd die here, horribly, on the roof of Antrid.

And the ray pistols were useless: they could not be fired inside the ballooning fabric of their suits without destroying it and them-

selves. There were only the books that were attached to the bulging sleeves—iron books for lifting—but these were heavy and sharp pointed. They might be of some use, at that.

Once they were completely blinded by a deluge of ice particles. Blaine could see neither the RX8 nor the waddling figures of the Llotta. He clung to his companions by means of the books, interlocking his with theirs, and waited for the storm to ease off. If ever it would! Pressing the thick glass window of his helmet against that of Ulana's, he saw that her eyes were wide with terror. But she smiled bravely and nodded encouragement. What a girl!

There was a momentary clearing a little way from the white wall and he saw the hull of the ship, a dim shape that loomed suddenly distinct and near. They dashed for the open port, still holding together.

One of the bulging, helmeted Llotta had reached the port and was scrambling inside. Blaine loosed himself and pounced on him, swinging one of his books in a sweeping, clawing arc. It caught in the fabric of the fellow's suit, ripping a foot-long slit. Like a punctured ballon it deflated and became a shriveled, clinging thing. The Llott hung there over the rim of the port, instantly suffocated and frozen stiff in the vacuum and intense cold of space as the air and heat of the suit was dissipated.

BLAINE dragged the rigid body from the opening and flung it to the white powdered copper surface. Wheeling, he saw that another of the Llotta had engaged Tommy. Two of them: in fact, there were three swollen figures in that mix-up. And the fourth was advancing on a smaller figure that turned and ran. Ulana! In a flash he was after them. Tom Farley would have to look out for himself, poor devil. With two of them against him, the outcome was dubious.

And then came a second snow-like deluge of white particles. He stumbled on, groping blindly: slipping, sliding in the precarious footing. It was ankle deep now, that powdery carpet of ice particles. Oh God, if that Llott devil got Ulana! He groaned aloud, a hideous mournful echo in the confines of the helmet. Groping, staggering there in the white silence, he gave up hope. The white-carpeted shell of Antrid heaved mightily from the force of some new concussion within, and threw Blaine scrambling.

Crawling now, feeling his way over the shuddering surface, he saw a dim huddled mass there in the pelting rain of ice. Moving, it was! Two bloated figures, one large and one small, rolling over and over: Ulana and the Llott who had chased her! He was there in one mad scramble and had dragged the fellow from her; was astride the rubbery inflated covering, clawing and tearing. The thing collapsed and went flat between his knees. He saw the mist of moisture-laden escaping air; felt the quick swelling and the jarring collapse as internal organs exploded from the atmospheric pressure inside the brute's body. Nauseated, he crawled away from the dead, grotesque-looking figure.

Ulana was on her knees, endeavoring to get to her feet. She had not been harmed, thanks to his good fortune in finding them. But where was the RX8? In the awful white silence, broken only by the eery patter of the ice particles on helmets and fabric, all sense of direction was lost. Through the double thickness of helmet lenses he looked into Ulana's eyes: for the last time, he thought.

AND then the white shroud lifted once more. The ship was there, not a hundred yards distant! Tommy still battled one of the Llotta, desperately circling the wary, grotesquely bobbing figure and swinging those terrible slashing hooks. The other was down, almost covered with white. Out of the picture, that one, but the remaining Llott was giving his friend a tough time of it. With the girl clinging to him, their arms hooked fast, he scuttled over the treacherous, ice-powdered copper. He had to get there quickly, and help.

Tom Farley slipped and fell heavily. The Llott was on him in a flash and they struggled madly there in splashings of white that hid them from view for a moment. Then one of them was up and the other lay still, a surprisingly shrunken and motionless figure.

The victor was coming at him then, bloated arms lashing out in swift, vicious circles. He had got Tommy, the damned swine! Blaine met his rush with a flying tackle that brought him down crashing. He lay still, the devil, knocked out probably by the metal helmet contacting with his skull. With arm poised for that slashing swing that would send him into eternity, Blaine peered through the lens of his helmet. His heart stopped beating and the upraised arm fell limp. This was no Llott: it was Tom Farley! Good Lord, he would have killed him in another second!

He tried to shake him; to bring him to. But he couldn't get hold of the bulging suit anywhere without danger of slashing it with one of those hooks. What if that fall had been fatal! Ulana was at his side now and he stared at her, white-faced, trembling in his uncertainty and horror.

And then Tommy opened his eyes. They saw him shake his head to clear it and then he, too, stared in horror. How close a call! Friend killing friend, out here in the airless cold on the shivering shell of the dying alien world!

They helped him to his feet and through the entrance manhole. His mind awhirl with emotion, Blaine saw that Ulana was inside and then followed as in a dream. He bolted the outer cover and turned the valve that would admit air to the lock. Soon they would be inside. With their protecting coverings discarded there would be the fresh air of the interior; light; warmth. Safety for Ulana. Away from the copper-clad world, they'd be on their way—home.

A LITTLE later, Blaine Carson sat at the controls of the RX8, Ulana at his side. Tommy was below, polishing and oiling and fondling his beloved machines. The surface of Antrid was visible through the viewing port, twenty miles beneath them and receding rapidly. Swinging in its new orbit, Antrid was gasping its last.

Over there, a few miles to the east, there spouted a column of white vapor that rose from a heaped up crater of ice which extended in a circle now many miles in diameter. Heavily laden with moisture as it was, the artificial atmosphere of Antrid provided a vast storm of frozen particles as it escaped into the absolute zero of space. For many days this would continue and the pressure within would drop gradually, down, down, until the air was so rare it would no longer sustain life. And there was no hope of repairing the break: the mountain of ice prevented getting at it from outside, and the rush of air from within made the handling of patch plates and brazing torches impossible. Besides, an area of supporting columns of more than a mile diameter had been wrecked by the blast of the rocket-tube. It

could require an Earth year to make such a repair, even if they could retain that atmosphere. Antrid was done for, this time.

Abruptly, Blaine turned his head from the port and gave his attention to the controls. The RX8 pointed her nose upward, away from this terrible world of disaster and death—homeward bound. With a tremendous blast from the stern rocket-tubes she headed swiftly into the heavens. A thousand miles, five, ten, they shot into space with ever increasing acceleration.

AND then a blazing orb was visible off to one side of the swiftly receding globe that was Antrid. Through the floor ports it shone, casting cheerful rays upward to the ceiling where they made a patchwork pattern of the gleaming metal.

"The sun," Ulana breathed, in awe. "I—I've never seen it, my Carson. It is most beautiful."

He drew her to him tenderly. "You'll see it every day, dear," he whispered, "when we're home."

Home—a wonderful thought! He'd not hoped to see it again; hadn't dared to since Antarro showed his hand back there in the asteroid belt. And now it was a reality. He was going home, and with him he was taking—Ulana.

"You—you think they will approve of me?" she was saying as he sent blasts from the steering rockets to swing them around on a new course sunward. "Your people, I mean. They will approve of your choice, my Carson?"

Anxiety showed in her wide-eyed gaze and she drew closer as if fearful of losing him.

If only she knew! If only he had words to tell her!

"Approve of you!" he said huskily. "Lord, girl, they'll love you! But not as I love you. It is the biggest thing—"

Tommy's discreet cough came from the head of the companionway. Blaine turned to glare savagely. His friend was standing there, grinning like an idiot and extending a paper-wrapped package.

"Look," he exclaimed guilelessly, "cigarettes. I found them, a whole carton."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Blaine exploded, careful that he spoke in English. "All you think of, all you've talked about since we left the vessel, is your hankering for a cigarette. For God's sake, get out of here and go smoke yourself to death."

But Tommy was advancing, still grinning, still extending the package. "Come on, old kid, have one," he insisted. "It'll do you good; quiet your nerves."

And his friend dropped a tantalizing eyelid. In spite of his annoyance Blaine was forced to laugh. "Oh, all right," he said, reaching for the package of smokes; "I'll take one. Just to please you. But, beat it then, will you?"

SWAGGERING as he went and casting knowing glances over his shoulder, he was gone. Great little Irishman, Tommy: always smiling, always there in a pinch, never worried, he was the best friend a man could have. They'd catch hell when they got back, for losing a part of their precious cargo. Those miserly k-metal people wouldn't give them credit for salvaging nine-tenths of the stuff (luckily only about a tenth had been removed by the Llotta); they'd only cry about the amount that was lost. And Tom Parley would laugh it off; kid them out of it.

Ulana was smiling as if she understood. She *did* understand. God bless her. She saw into this wonderful friendship and was glad. It was great to have a friend like that—and a girl like this.

Hand in hand, they gazed into the heavens before them. To the girl it was a most marvelous sight, an omen of good fortune and of happiness to come. She nestled her head into the shoulder of the Earth man as she watched; spellbound.

For a long time the silence was broken only by the steady muffled purr of the stern rocket-tubes. The aroma of cigarette smoke drifted up the companionway.

Out there in the heavens was the sun, Mars, Earth, Venus; the dear old solar system was still intact, undisturbed excepting for the slight perturbation in the region of Jupiter. Blaine doubted if the influence was measureable insofar as changes in the motions of the inner planets were concerned.

He turned to the eyepiece of the telescope and swung the instrument around to bear on the Earth. A cool green crescent was there in the field of vision: the eastern coast line of the Americas outlined clear and distinct.

"Look, dear," he whispered. "Home! Your new home is there; our home together."

She sighed happily as she gazed at the inviting sunlit outlines. "Home," she repeated, softly, reverently, "with you, oh my Carson—for all eternity."

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THE RED HELL OF JUPITER

A Thrilling Novelette of Interplanetary Adventure—Complete—

By Paul Ernst

THE SOLAR MAGNET

Another Exploit of the Super-Scientific Genius Dr. Bird

By Capt. S. P. Meek

THE HEADS OF APEX

A Unique Dimensional Story

By Francis Flagg

BROOD OF THE DARK MOON

Part Three of the Splendid Current Novel

By Charles Willard Diffin

—And Others!



The rip sprayed a web around his body.

Devil Crystals of Arret

By Hal K. Wells

BENJAMIN MARLOWE and his young assistant, Larry Powell, opened the door of the Marlowe laboratory, then stopped aghast at the sight which greeted their startled eyes.

There on the central floor-plate directly in the focus of the big atomic projector stood the slender figure of Joan Marlowe, old Benjamin Marlowe's niece and Larry Powell's fiancee.

The girl had apparently only been awaiting their return to the laboratory for around her gray laboratory smock was already fastened one of their Silver Belts, and a cord was already in place running from her wrist to the main switch of the projection mechanism.

Facing a six-hour deadline of death, young Larry finds a hostile world of rat-men and tickling Devil Crystals.

Joan's clear blue eyes sparkled with the thrill of high adventure as she swiftly raised a slender hand in a gesture of warning to the two men.

"Don't try to stop me," she warned quietly. "I can jerk the switch and be in Arret, before you've taken two steps. I'm going to Arret, anyway. I was only waiting for you to return to the laboratory so I'd be sure of having you here to bring me back to Earth again before I have time to get into any serious trouble over there."

"But, Joan," Benjamin Marlowe protested, "this is sheer madness! No one can possibly guess what terrible conditions you may confront in Arret. We've never dared to send a human being across the atomic barrier yet!"

"We've sent all kinds of animals across, though," Joan retorted calmly, "and as long as we recalled them within the twelve-hour limit they always came back alive and unhurt. There's no reason why a human being should not be able to make the round trip just as safely. Ever since our Silver Belts first came back with the weird plant and mineral fragments which proved that there really is such a place as Arret, I've been wild to see with my own eyes the incredible things that must exist there."

Joan waved her hand in gay farewell. "Good-by, Uncle Ben and Larry! I know that you'll drag me back just as quickly as you can possibly dash over to the recall switch, but I'll at least have had a few precious seconds of sightseeing as Earth's first human visitor to Arret!"

LARRY POWELL was already sprinting for the mechanism as Joan jerked the cord that ran to the switch, but he was barely halfway across the intervening space when the big atomic projector flared forth in a brilliant gush of roseate flame.

For a fraction of a second Joan's slender figure was outlined in the very heart of the ruddy glow, then vanished completely. There was left only a short length of the switch cord to indicate that the girl had ever stood there.

Powell reached the mechanism and shut off the projector's flame, then turned swiftly to the control-panel of the recall mechanism. As he closed the switch on this panel, three banks of tubes set in triangular form around the floor-plate upon which Joan had stood glowed a brilliant and blinding green.

Shielding his eyes from the glare with an upraised forearm, Powell began stepping a rheostat up to more and more power. In his anxiety, he increased the power far too quickly. There was a sudden gush of blue-white flame from the heart of the mechanism, together with the hissing crackle of fusing metal. The green light in the tubes promptly died.

Benjamin Marlowe was bending over the apparatus almost instantly. A moment later he raised a face that had suddenly gone white. There was terror in his eyes as he turned to his assistant.

"The entire second series of coils is burned out, Larry!" he gasped in consternation. "Joan is marooned over there in Arret—marooned in that grim unknown land as completely beyond our reach as though she were upon one of the moons of Mars!"

For a long moment the two men gazed at each other with horror-stricken faces, dazed and shaken. Then they quickly drew themselves together again and set about the herculean task of making the necessary repairs to the damaged mechanism in time to rescue Joan before the twelve-hour limit should doom the girl to forever remain an exile in that land of alien mystery beyond the atomic barrier.

THEIR previous experiments with animals had proved that no living creature from Earth could be brought back after it had been in Arret over twelve hours. After that time the change in the atoms constituting living tissues apparently became permanently Arretian, for the Silver Belts returned without any trace of their original wearers.

The necessary repairs to the damaged coils were of such an exacting and intricate nature that any great speed was impossible. Hours passed while the two men bent to their work with grim concentration. Neither of them dared think too much of what nameless dangers might be confronting Joan during those weary hours. Their actual knowledge of Arret was so pitiably slight.

Some months ago, while they were experimenting upon apparatus for reversing the electrical charges of an atom's electrons and protons, they had first stumbled upon the incredible fact that such a place as Arret really existed. They found that it was another world occupying the same position in space as Earth, with the fundamental difference in the two interwoven planes of existence lying in the electrical make-up of the atoms that constituted matter in each plane.

On Earth all atoms are composed of small heavy protons that are always positive in charge, and larger lighter electrons that are always negative. In Arret the protons were negative, and the electrons positive. The result was two worlds occupying the same space at the same time, yet with matter so essentially and completely different that each world was intangible to the other. They had named the unseen world Arret, the reverse of Terra.

Finding it impossible to work directly upon most forms of matter, the experimenters had finally evolved a silver alloy that served as a medium both for sending objects into Arret and then bringing them back to Earth. By focussing the flame of the projection apparatus upon a Silver Belt of this alloy, the electrical charges of the Belt's atoms were reversed, automatically causing the Belt to vanish from Earth and materialize in Arret. At the same time the atoms of any object within the Belt's immediate radius were similarly transformed, and that object was taken into Arret with the Belt.

The recall mechanism functioned by broadcasting a power wave that again reversed the atomic charge of the Belt and its contained object back to that of Earth. At the same time the recall wave exerted an attractive force that drew the atoms back to a central point in the laboratory, where they were re-materialized upon the same floor-plate from which they had originally been sent.

THE twelve-hour time limit was half up when Benjamin Marlowe and Larry Powell finally straightened up wearily from their work over the recall mechanism, their repairs completed. It had been one o'clock in the afternoon when Joan Marlowe vanished from Earth in the roseate flare of the projector. It was now nearly seven o'clock.

With nerves tense from anxiety, the two men crossed over to the control-panel of the recall apparatus. This time they donned goggles of dark glass to shield their eyes from the blinding green glare. Marlowe threw the main switch, and the banked tubes came to life in a flood of vivid emerald light.

Marlowe began stepping the rheostat up gradually to more power, advancing it with cautious slowness to avoid any chance of a repetition of the previous accident. The green radiance streaming from the tubes in every direction began to throb with an electric force that the two men could feel pulsing through their own bodies.

There was a click as the rheostat struck the last notch. The green radiance was now a searing flame that half-blinded them even through the thick dark glass of their protective goggles, while the vibrant force of the green rays was sweeping through their bodies with a tingling shock that nearly took their breath away.

Tensely the two men stared at the metal floor-plate in the center of the area bounded by the flaming green tubes. Just over the plate the green radiance seemed to be thickening and swirling oddly. The swirling eddy became a small dense cloud of darker green light. Then abruptly, like the fade-in on a moving picture screen, from the cloud over the plate the misty outlines of an object swiftly cleared and solidified into a bizarre something at whose unfamiliar aspect both Marlowe and Powell gasped in amazement.

Marlowe snapped the switch off, and the green radiance vanished. Stripping the dark goggles from their eyes, the two men hurried over for a closer view of the thing that rested quiescent and apparently lifeless there on the metal floor-plate.

IT was shaped like a huge egg, a little over a yard long, and was apparently composed of a solid lump of some unknown crystalline substance that closely resembled very clear, pale amber. Embedded in the heart of the strange egg were clearly visible objects which caused Marlowe and Powell to gasp in mingled horror and amazement.

Chief among the things imprisoned in that amber shroud was the Silver Belt that Joan had worn, but the Belt was now looped over the bony shoulder of a skeleton that by no possible stretch of the imagination could ever have been that of a creature of this Earth.

The skeleton was still perfectly articulated, and gleamed through the crystalline amber as though its bony surfaces were encrusted with diamond dust. The bones were apparently those of a creature that in life had been half dwarf-ape and half giant rat.

The beast had stood a little under a yard in height. The legs were short, powerful, and bowed. The long arms ended in claw-like travesties of hands. The skull was relatively small, with a sharply sloping forehead and projecting squirrel-like teeth that were markedly rodent.

Around the skeleton's neck there was a wide band of some strange gray metal, with its smooth outer surface roughly scratched in characters that resembled primitive hieroglyphics.

Marlowe's face was white with grief as he turned to Powell. "Joan must be dead, Larry," he said sadly. "Otherwise, she would surely never have allowed her Silver Belt to pass into the possession of—this! She knew that the Belt represented her only hope of ever being brought back to this world."

FOR a moment Powell stared intently into the heart of the crystalline egg without answering. Then suddenly he straightened up with marked excitement upon his face.

"There's a small sheet of paper entwined in the coils of that Belt!" he exclaimed. "It may be a message from Joan!"

Swiftly the two men lifted the amber egg up to the top of a workbench. Powell took a small hammer to test the hardness of the strange translucent substance.

He struck it a sharp rap, then recoiled in surprise at the effect of his blow, for the entire egg instantly shattered with a tinkling crash like the bursting of a huge glass bubble. So complete was the disintegration of the egg and the skeleton within it that all that remained of either

was a heap of diamond and amber dust. The only things left intact were the Silver Belt and the metal collar.

Powell snatched up the Belt and extracted the small piece of paper that had been firmly tucked into its coils. Hurriedly written in pencil upon the paper was a message in a handwriting familiar to both Powell and Marlowe:

> Help! I am held prisoner in the Cave of Blue Flames!
> —Joan.

"Larry, Joan must still be alive over there in Arret!" There was new hope in Benjamin Marlowe's voice.

"Yes, alive and held captive by whatever monstrosities may inhabit that unknown plane," Powell agreed grimly. "There's only one way in which we can possibly rescue her now. That is for you to send me into Arret with a reserve Belt for Joan. I'll be ready to start as soon as I get a couple of automatic pistols that I have up in my room. It's a sure thing that I'll need them over there in Arret."

FIVE minutes later Powell stood ready and waiting upon the floor-plate in the focus of the big atomic projector, with the central lens of the apparatus levelled down upon him like a huge searchlight. Around Powell's waist were strapped two Silver Belts, and a cartridge belt with a holstered .45-calibre automatic on either side. His wrist-watch was synchronized to the second with Benjamin Marlowe's watch.

"Joan's twelve-hour time limit in Arret will expire at one o'clock tomorrow morning," Powell reminded Marlowe. "That gives me nearly six hours in which to find her and equip her with a Silver Belt. You will broadcast the recall wave at exactly one o'clock. If I haven't succeeded in finding Joan by then, I'll discard my own Belt and stay on over there in Arret with her. . . . I'm ready to start now, whenever you are."

Benjamin Marlowe raised his hand to the switch in the projector's control panel. "Good-by, Larry,"—the old man's voice shook a trifle in spite of himself—"and may God be with you!" He closed the switch.

A great burst of roseate flame leaped toward Powell from the projector. The laboratory was instantly blotted out in a swirling chaos of ruddy radiance that swept him up and away like a chip upon a tidal wave. There was a long moment during which he seemed to hurtle helplessly through a universe of swirling tinted mists, while great electric waves tingled with exquisite poignancy through every atom of his body.

Then the mists suddenly cleared like the tearing away of a mighty curtain, and with startling abruptness Powell found himself again in a solid world of material things. For a moment as he gazed dazedly about him he thought that the roseate glow of the projector must still be playing tricks with his eyesight, for the landscape around him was completely and incredibly red!

HE soon realized that the monochrome of scarlet was a natural aspect of things in Arret. The weird vegetation all around him was of a uniform glossy red. The sandy soil under his feet was dull brick-red. High in the reddish-saffron sky overhead there blazed a lurid orb of blood-red hue, the intense heat of its ruddy radiance giving the still dry air a nearly tropical temperature. From this orb's position in the sky and its size, Powell was forced to conclude that it must be the Arretian equivalent of Earth's moon.

For a moment he stood motionless as he peered cautiously around him, trying to decide what should be his first step in this scarlet world that

was so utterly alien in every way to his own. On every side the landscape stretched monotonously away from him in low rolling dunes like the frozen ground swell of a crimson sea—dunes covered with vegetation of a kind never seen upon Earth.

Not a leaf existed in all that weird flora. Instead of leaves or twigs the constituent units of bushes and grasses consisted of globules, glossy spheres of scarlet that ranged in size from pinheads to the bulk of large pumpkins. The branches of the vegetation were formed from strings of the globules set edge to edge and tapering in size like graduated beads strung upon wire, dwindling in bulk until the tips of the branches were as fragile as the fronds of maidenhair fern. The bulk of the shrubbery was head-high, and so dense that Powell could see for only a couple of yards into the thicket in any direction.

The stillness around Powell was complete. Not even a globular twig stirred in the hot dry air. Powell decided to head for the crest of one of the low dunes some fifty feet away. From its top he might be able to sight something that would give a clue to the location of the "Cave of Blue Flames" of which Joan had written.

HE arrived at the foot of the dune's slope without incident. But there he came to an abrupt halt as the silence was suddenly shattered by a strange sound from the shrubbery-covered crest just above him. It was a musical, tinkling crash, oddly suggestive of a handful of thin glass plates shattering upon a stone floor. A second later there came the agonized scream of some creature in its death throes.

The tinkling, crashing sound promptly swelled to a steady pulsing song like that of a brittle river of crystalline glass surging and breaking over granite boulders. There was an eery beauty in that tinkling burst of melody, yet with the beauty there was an intangible suggestion of horror that made Powell's flesh creep.

The crystalline song swelled to a crescendo climax. Then there came another sound, a single resonant note like that given when a string of a bass viol is violently plucked—and the tinkling melody abruptly died. Immediately following the resonant twang some object was ejected from the midst of the thicket on the dune's crest, and came rolling and bounding down the gentle slope toward Powell.

It finally came to rest against the base of a bush almost at his feet. He whistled softly in surprise as he saw the nature of the thing. It was another of the yard-long egg-shaped crystals of translucent amber like the one that had been materialized in Benjamin Marlowe's laboratory. Imprisoned in the clear depths of this amber egg was the sparkling, diamond-encrusted skeleton of what had apparently been a small quadruped about the size of a fox.

Powell's eyes narrowed in speculation as he realized that he had before him the first slight clue as to what might have happened to Joan. Her Silver Belt had been enclosed in one of those amber, crystalline eggs. Apparently her capture had been in some way connected with that sinister, unseen Tinkling Death.

POWELL began cautiously working his way up the slope of the dune, with an automatic pistol ready for use in his right hand. Silence reigned unbroken now in the thicket on the crest, but with each upward step that he took there came with constantly increasing force a feeling of some vast, alien intelligence lurking up there, watching and waiting.

Nearer and nearer the crest he worked his wary way, until he was so close that he fancied he could see

the vague outline of some monstrous silvery bulk looming there in the heart of the red thicket. He took another cautious step forward—and then his careful stalking was sharply interrupted.

Without a second's warning there came the roaring rush of great wings beating the air just above him. Powell tried to dive for cover, but he was too late. A slender snaky tentacle came lashing down and struck his shoulder with a force that sent him sprawling forward upon his face. Before he could rise, two of the tentacles twined around him, and he was jerked up into the air like a wood-grub captured by a husky robin.

Again the great wings above him threshed the air in tremendous power, as the unseen monster started away with its prey. Then the tentacles from which he was dangling shifted their grip slightly, turning Powell's body in the air so that he could look up and get his first glimpse of the thing that had captured him. He shuddered at what he saw. The creature was a hideous combination of octopus and giant bat.

Naked wings of membrane spanned twenty feet from tip to tip. There was a pursy sac-like body, ending in a head with staring, lidless eyes and a great black beak that looked strong enough to shear sheet steel. From the body descended half a dozen long writhing tentacles.

POWELL'S one hundred and eighty pounds made a weight that was apparently a burden for even this flying monster. It flew jerkily along, scarcely a dozen feet from the ground, and there was laborious effort obvious in every movement of its flapping wings. Powell decided to make a prompt break for escape before the octopus-bat succeeded in fighting its way any higher. His left arm was still pinioned to his body by one of the constricting tentacles, but his right hand, with the automatic in it, was free.

He swung the weapon's muzzle into line with the hideous face above him, then sent a stream of lead crashing upward into the creature's head. The bullet struck squarely home. The tentacles tightened convulsively with a force that almost cracked Powell's ribs. Then in another paroxysm of agony the tentacles flung him free.

The impetus of his fall sent him rolling for a dozen feet. Unhurt, save for minor scratches and bruises, he scrambled to his feet just in time to see the mortally wounded octopus-bat come crashing down in the red vegetation some thirty yards away. For a few minutes there was audible a convulsive threshing; and then there was silence.

Powell refilled the automatic's clip, then looked about, trying to regain his bearings. He wanted to return to the thicket of the Tinkling Death, but the octopus-bat had carried him hundreds of yards from there and he was now uncertain even of the direction in which the thicket was.

As he paused in indecision, there came to Powell's ears a new sound that promptly drove all thought of the Tinkling Death from his mind.

THE sound of his gun against the octopus-bat had apparently attracted new and unseen assailants—and their number was legion. Swiftly closing in upon him from every side there came the rustle and whisper of countless thousands of unseen foes advancing through the dense red thickets.

Completely hemmed in as he was, flight was out of the question. He sought the center of a small clearing, some ten feet in diameter, in order to gain at least a moment's sight of his adversaries before they swarmed in upon him. With an au-

tomatic in each hand, he waited tense and ready.

The encircling rush came swiftly nearer, until Powell was suddenly aware that the unseen horde had arrived. The thicket bordering his tiny clearing was literally alive with yard-high furry bodies of creatures that dodged about too swiftly in the cover of the red-brushes for him to get a clear view of any of them. There was a constant babel of snarling, chattering sound as the things called back and forth to each other.

Then the chattering stopped abruptly, as though at the command of some unseen leader. The next moment one of the creatures stepped boldly out into full view in the clearing. Powell's scalp crinkled in disgust as he realized the nature of the thing confronting him.

It was literally a rat-man. Its upright posture upon two powerful, bowed hind legs was that of a man, but its human-like points were overshadowed by a dozen indelible marks of the beast. A coat of short, dirty gray fur covered the creature from head to foot. Its hands and feet were claw-like travesties of human members. Its pointed, chinless face with its projecting teeth and glittering little beady eyes was that of a giant rodent.

The beast in the clearing was apparently a leader of some sort, for around his throat was a wide collar of gray metal, with its flat surface marked in rudely scratched hieroglyphics. Powell's heart leaped as he noted the collar. In this creature before him he had his second clue to the whereabouts of Joan Marlowe.

Not only was the collar practically identical to the one worn by the skeleton that had been materialized in the egg back in the laboratory, but the skeleton itself was obviously that of one of the rat-men. Could it be this grotesque horde of human-like rodents that was holding Joan captive in the Cave of Blue Flames?

POWELL tried desperately to think of some way of communicating with the gray-collared leader. Then the beast shrilled a command that brought hundreds of the beasts swarming into the clearing from every side, and in the face of the menace of their countless glittering eyes and bared fangs Powell abandoned all thought of attempting to parley with the beasts.

There was another shrill command from the leader, and the horde closed in. Both of Powell's guns flamed in a crashing leaden hail that swept the close-packed ranks of furry bodies with murderous effect. But he was doomed by sheer weight of numbers.

The rat-men directly in front of the blazing pistols wavered momentarily, but the press of the hundreds behind them swept them inexorably forward. Powell emptied both guns in a last vain effort. Then he was swept from his feet, and the horde surged over him.

Blinded and smothered by the dozens of furry bodies that swarmed over him, he had hardly a chance to even try to fight back. His cartridge-belt and guns, his Silver Belts and his wrist-watch were stripped from him by the dozens of claw-like hands that searched his body. Other claw-hands jerked his arms behind his back and lashed them firmly together with rope.

A blanketing sheet of some heavy fabric was crammed over his head and tied in place so tightly that he was completely blindfolded and half-suffocated. A noose was knotted around his neck. A suggestive jerk of this noose brought Powell lurching to his feet; there was another commanding jerk, and he obediently started walking.

THE march that followed soon became torture for the captive. Blindfolded as he was, and having only the occasional jerks of rope to

guide his footsteps, be stumbled and fell repeatedly, until his aching body seemed one solid mass of bruises.

As nearly as he could judge, the horde had conducted him nearly two miles when the path abruptly sloped downward. A moment later the sudden coolness of the air and the echoes about him told him that they had entered an underground passage of some kind. After traversing this passage for several yards they emerged into what was apparently a large open area, for he could hear the excited chattering and squealing of countless thousands of rat-men on every side of him.

He was dragged forward a dozen steps more, then brought to a halt. The blindfolding fabric was roughly stripped from his head. For a moment he blinked dazedly, half-blinded by a glare of blue light that flooded the place.

He was standing in a vast cavern. From dozens of fissures high in the rock walls streamed flickering sheets of blue flame which both warmed and lighted the place. There was a weird tingling glow in the air that suggested that the strange blue fires might be electrical in their origin.

Powell looked eagerly around for Joan, but he could see no trace of her. The only other living beings in the big cavern were the swarming thousands of the rat-people. The brutes were apparently too low in the evolutionary scale to have any but the most primitive form of tribal organization.

Sitting on a rude rock throne just in front of Powell was a grotesquely fat, mangy-furred old rat-man who was obviously the king of the horde. Some thirty or forty rat-men, larger and stronger than their fellows, wore the gray-metal collars that apparently marked them as minor leaders.

THE great bulk of the horde, numbering far into the thousands, swarmed in the cavern in one vast animal pack, sleeping, feeding, snarling, fighting. As Powell was halted before the king's throne, most of them abandoned their other pursuits to come surging around the captive in a jostling, curious mob.

The metal-collared leader of the pack that had captured Powell presented the rat-king with the captive's gun-belt and two Silver Belts, accompanying the gifts with a squealing oration that was apparently a recital of the capture. The old monarch took the trophies with delight.

The two Silver Belts were promptly draped over his own furry shoulders by the king—seemingly following the same primitive love for adornment that inspires an African savage to ornament his person with any new and glittering object he happens to acquire. The rat-king then graciously draped the cartridge-belt and holstered automatics around the shoulders of the metal-collared leader who had captured Powell.

The king turned his attention back to his prisoner. He studied the captive curiously for a moment or two, then squealed a brief command. A score of the rat-men promptly closed in upon Powell, and began herding him toward a far back corner of the big cavern.

Stopping a few yards away from the edge of what seemed to be a wide deep pit in the rock floor, the guard stripped Powell's bonds from him. Powell made no move to take advantage of his freedom, realizing that the swarming thousands of rodents in the cave made escape out of the question for the moment. He allowed himself to be docilely herded on to the edge of the pit.

And the next moment he exclaimed aloud in delighted surprise as he gazed down at the floor of the pit ten feet beneath him. There, sitting on a low heap of stones on the pit's sandy floor, white-faced and weary but apparently unhurt, was Joan Marlowe.

THE girl's face brightened in relief as she looked up and recognized him.

"Larry! Oh, thank God you've come!"

The leader of the guards motioned for Powell to jump down into the pit. He needed no urging. A moment later he landed lightly on the sandy floor of the pit, and Joan was in his arms.

The rat-men left a dozen of their number scattered as sentries around the edge of the pit. The rest of them returned to the main horde, leaving the prisoners to their own devices.

"I knew that you'd come, Larry, as soon as you got my note," Joan exclaimed happily. "But how did you ever succeed in finding this Cave of Blue Flame?"

"I didn't find it myself," Powell admitted. "I was captured like a boob and dragged here." He told Joan of his mishaps since arriving in Arret.

The girl nodded when he had finished. "Much the same happened to me, Larry, only the red moon wasn't shining then. The only light was from what looked like the dim ghost of a big yellow sun. I materialized in Arret almost in the middle of a scouting group of rat-men. They took me captive immediately. When several minutes passed without you and Uncle Benjamin broadcasting the recall wave for me, I knew that something terrible must have happened back in the laboratory, and that I might be marooned in Arret for hours.

"I tried to hang onto my Silver Belt, of course," the girl continued, "but when I was brought to the cavern here I saw that the king was going to take it. There was a notebook and a pencil in my laboratory smock. I managed to write the note and twine it into the belt just before it was taken from me. The king seemed to think the note enhanced the Belt's value as an ornament. He was wearing it when I last saw it. Was he materialized in the laboratory with the Belt?"

Powell told her of the amber egg and the skeleton.

"The same sort of crystalline amber egg that accompanied the work of the mysterious Tinkling Death, wasn't it?" Joan mused. "One of the king's lieutenants must have stolen the Belt, and reaped prompt retribution when he tried to flee. I wonder what that weird Tinkling Death is?"

"Possibly some strange weapon of the rat-men," Powell hazarded.

"No, they are as afraid of it as we are. While I was being brought here to this cave the Tinkling Death was heard several times in the distance, and the rat-men were obviously terrified at the sound."

THE prisoners' conversation was abruptly interrupted by a rhythmic, snarling chant from the vast horde of rat-men in the cavern above. The chant rose and fell in a rude cadence that was suggestively ritual in nature.

"They've been doing that at intervals ever since I was first brought here," Joan commented. "It sounds almost like the beginning of some primitive religious ceremony, doesn't it?"

Powell nodded, without telling Joan the depressing thought in his mind. The rat-men were so low in the evolutionary scale as to be little more than beasts, and a prominent feature of nearly all primitive religious rites is the sacrifice of living beings. Powell could not help but wonder whether the chanting might not mark the beginning of rites which would end with the sacrifice of himself and Joan to some monstrous deity of theirs.

The snarling chant continued with monotonous regularity for hours, while the prisoners huddled helplessly together there on the floor of the pit, awaiting the next move of

the rat-men. Any thought of escape was out of the question. The sheer walls of the pit were always guarded by alert sentries who had only to call to bring the entire horde to their help.

Without Powell's wrist-watch, the captives had no way of accurately following the lapse of time, but they both realized that the twelve-hour time limit upon Joan's rescue from Arret must be coming perilously near its end. They waited in momentary fear lest a sudden turmoil in the cavern above them should indicate that Benjamin Marlowe had broadcast the recall wave, whisking the two Belts back to Earth, together with the old rat-king who presumably still wore them.

THE chanting above rose slowly to a snarling climax, then swiftly died away into silence. A moment later there came the sound of thousands of claw-like feet scratching over the rocky floor as the main horde apparently began marching out of the cavern. A detachment of fifty rat-men appeared at the pit's edge.

A rude metal ladder was shoved down to the captives, and a metal-collared leader motioned for them to climb up. Seeing nothing to be gained by refusal, they obeyed. They were seized as they reached the top, and their hands again bound behind them. The overwhelming numbers of the rat-men made any attempt at resistance futile.

There was no sign of the main horde as Joan and Powell were herded out through the empty cavern and out into the open air again. With their prisoners in the center of their group, the rat-men started along a well-worn path that wound through the red vegetation. Overhead the blood-red moon still blazed down in lurid splendor.

From somewhere ahead of them the captives began to again hear the distant squealing chant of the main horde. They steadily approached the sound, until abruptly they emerged into a huge clearing that had apparently been a ceremonial assembly place for generations, for its smooth sandy floor was packed down nearly to the hardness of rock.

The main horde of rat-men was there now, countless thousands of them, packed in a roughly crescent-shaped mob, with the open side of their formation facing what seemed to be a large deep pit, some seventy yards in circumference. In the clear space left between the horde and the edge of the pit was a smaller group, among them the old king himself.

Powell's heart leaped as he noted that the Silver Belts were still draped over the mangy old monarch's shoulders. If only he and Joan could get their hands on those precious Belts before Benjamin Marlowe broadcast the recall wave that would forever snatch them out of their reach!

THE captives were hurried through the main horde and taken in charge by a score of picked guards who herded them on to join a small group of four rat-men near the pit's edge. These four rodents were apparently also prisoners, for their arms were firmly bound behind them.

The rat-king, accompanied only by the metal-collared leader, around whose shoulders the gun-belt was still draped, stood near the pit's edge some ten yards distant from the guards and captives. Between the prisoners and the rodent monarch the edge of the pit jutted out in a narrow tongue of rock that extended outward for about twenty feet over the pit.

Joan and Powell had barely taken their place with the other captives when an abrupt and familiar sound drew their attention to the floor of the pit some thirty feet beneath

them. Its smooth sandy bottom was clearly visible from where they stood. And there on that sandy floor were six great gleaming shapes of menace which brought involuntary gasps of horrified amazement to the captives' lips.

The faint musical tinkling sound as the things moved in occasional ponderous restlessness was unmistakable. Joan and Powell realized that the amazing organisms responsible for the mysterious Tinkling Death were at last before them.

The things were giant *living* crystals—great silvery semi-transparent shapes nearly ten feet in height, their faceted sides pulsing in sinister and incredible life as they gleamed in unearthly beauty beneath the blazing rays of the red moon!

Near the center of each of the giant crystals there was visible through the semi-transparent wall a large inner nucleus of sullen opalescence that ceaselessly swirled and eddied.

Their powers of movement were apparently limited to a slow, ponderous, half-rocking, half-rolling progress on their heavy rounded bases. They were now grouped in a rough semicircle just under the edge of the rocky projection that extended out over the pit. The opalescent nucleus in every silvery faceted form seemed to be "watching" with frightening intensity the figures on the pit's edge above them.

THERE was no mistaking the meaning of the scene. The giant carnivorous crystals had obviously been lured from their normal habitat in Arret's red vegetation, and established there in the big pit by the rat-men to act as principals in their primitive religious ceremonies.

Those Devil Crystals waiting down there on the pit's floor were waiting to be fed—and the small group of captives, rat-men and human beings, were to be the feast!

Utterly sick at heart, Powell wondered if they would at least be given the boon of a merciful death before being hurled over the brink to those lurking shapes. He was not left long in doubt.

At a shrill command from the rat-king the guards closed in upon the captives and herded two of the bound rat-men from among them. A guard placed to the lips of each of the captive brutes a small cup containing a faintly cloudy white liquid. Apparently resigned to their fate, the creatures docilely drained the cups.

The drugged drinks acted with startling rapidity. Scarcely a minute passed before the rodents' eyes clouded dully, their jaws dropped slackly open, and their bodies stiffened in almost complete rigidity.

The bonds were quickly stripped from the two stupefied creatures. The ceremonial rites apparently required that the victims go to their doom unbound and of their own volition. The guards maneuvered the two over to the rocky projection that jutted out over the pit.

Moving with the stiffly wooden steps of automatons, the two victims started out along the narrow projection, leaving the guards behind. On they marched, straight for the end of the rocky strip—and then, without a second's hesitation, they plunged on and over.

Their bodies crashed to the pit's floor squarely among the group of waiting crystals. One of the rat-men lay motionless. The other dazedly tried to struggle to his feet—but was too late.

FROM the side of the nearest Devil Crystal, some fifteen feet away from the dazed rat-man, a cone-shaped projection budded with startling swiftness.

A fraction of a second more and the projection had lengthened into a long slender arm of crystalline sil-

ver that streaked across the intervening space with the swiftness of a spear.

There was a crashing, tinkling sound as the point of the arm struck the furry body of the rat-man. Then the arm's point sprayed into a web of shining filaments that laced the rodent's body inexorably in their web.

The arm immediately contracted, jerking the victim irresistibly toward the waiting crystal. A second later the rat-man was pinned against the faceted crystalline side just under the opalescent nucleus.

The moment the furry body made contact with the crystal's side a terrifying phenomenon occurred. Crystals grew and spread all over its form with the lightning growth of water-glass. Faster and faster clustered the crystalline shroud, until the furry body was lanced through and through—and all the time the air was filled with eldritch music as of a thousand sheets of thinnest glass crashing, tinkling and shattering.

The crystal growths over the imprisoned body rounded their contours and merged together until they were in the form of a great crystalline egg. The outlines of the rodent's body blurred and vanished, melting swiftly until only a diamond-encrusted skeleton was left. The color of the great Devil Crystal began to gleam pink as the victim's flesh and blood were absorbed.

The egg-like excrescence under the nucleus turned in hue to pale translucent amber in whose depths the diamond skeleton gleamed with weird brilliance. Then there came a sudden twang, as of a violently plucked string on a bass viol, and the amber egg dropped from the faceted side. The Crystal's feast was over.

One of the most terrifying aspects of the whole thing had been its incredible speed. The entire tragedy had occurred in but little over two minutes from the time the lance-arm had first struck the rat-man.

In the meantime the body of the second rodent had been drawn in and devoured by another of the carnivorous crystalline monsters. There came a second twang now, as its skeleton in its amber shroud was discarded.

POWELL'S brain reeled as he saw the other crystals move sluggishly nearer the foot of the rocky projection in anticipation of the next victims.

The remaining two captive rat-men came next. They were swiftly drugged, unbound, and started on their dazed march. They trudged woodenly out the rocky projection to its end, then on and over; and again the grim tragedy of the Devil Crystal's feast was repeated, to the accompaniment of that eerily beautiful crashing, tinkling song.

The four Devil Crystals that had completed their gruesome feast moved sluggishly away, leaving the space clear for the two crystals that remained unfed. The score of guards closed in upon Joan and Powell.

With the crystalline doom at last staring them squarely in the face, Powell went berserk in a final desperate effort to gain even a moment's respite. He lashed out in a writhing, kicking flurry that almost cleared the space around them.

Then three of the rat-men slipped behind him, and a second later his feet were jerked from under him. His bound arms made him helpless to avert his fall, and he crashed heavily to the ground. Then a dozen of the powerful little beasts swarmed over him, completely overpowering him by their numbers.

Claw-like hands pried his set jaws apart. A cup of the cloudy white liquid was pressed to his lips. He choked; then, unable to help himself, he had to let the stuff pour down his throat. It had an acid taste faintly reminiscent of lemons. The rat-men apparently wanted to make sure of giving him enough, for they

poured another full cup of the liquid down his throat before releasing him.

The guards then fell back and Powell stumbled to his feet. Joan was already up again, standing close beside him. From the wry expression upon her face, Powell knew that she had also been given the drugged potion.

FOR a long minute the two stood there with every nerve trembling as they helplessly waited for the paralyzing numbness to sweep over their bodies. The seconds passed slowly, and still their minds remained as clear as though the drug had been water. Another full minute elapsed without effect, before they could finally convince themselves of the amazing truth.

The drugged drink of the rat-men, instantly paralyzing to those of their own rodent race, was utterly harmless to the human being from another world!

Powell instantly realized the forlorn last chance their unexpected immunity to the drug gave them.

"Play 'possum, Joan!" he whispered tensely. "Then we'll make a break for the king and those Belts!"

Joan nodded slightly in quick understanding. Powell let his jaw drop slack and open, and stiffened his body in imitation of the stupor the rodent drug victims had shown. Joan promptly followed his lead. The alertly watching guards relaxed their tense vigilance in obvious relief.

The guards waited another minute to be sure of the drug's effects. Then, apparently satisfied, they stepped forward and unbound the two prisoners. Powell let his bonds drop from him without making a hostile move of any kind. He wanted first to wait until he was free of the encircling guards.

The rat-men maneuvered the two into position, and prodded them forward toward the projecting point of rock. They obediently began their march, simulating as best they could the wooden mechanical gait of the drug victims. Powell saw from the corner of his eye that Joan was tensely watching his face for a sign from him.

As the captives reached the narrow projection the guards dropped a couple of yards behind and halted to watch. It was the chance for which Powell had been waiting.

"Let's go!" he shouted to Joan. The girl, alert for his signal, was right beside him as they wheeled and dashed at break-neck speed for the rat-king and his sole lieutenant, some ten yards away.

THEY were upon the two startled rodent leaders before they even realized what was happening. Powell swept the squirming old king up in the air, tore the Silver Belts from about the monarch's shoulders, and flung the creature sprawling and senseless at the pit's edge.

The lieutenant leaped for Powell's throat in a belated effort at rescue, but Powell smashed a solid fist squarely into its snarling face, and the brute collapsed with a broken neck.

Snatching his gun-belt from the fallen rat-man, Powell crammed new clips of ammunition into the two guns and wheeled to confront the rest of the rat-men. The detachment of guards, demoralized by the dazzling speed of the captives' sortie, were milling in obvious uncertainty.

Behind them the thousands of the main horde were chattering and squealing in excited frenzy, dazed and bewildered by their king's swift overthrow. The whole clearing was a seething mob of excited beasts, stunned for the moment, but ready at any second to rally from their shock and surge forward in a furious charge that would sweep everything before it.

Powell menaced the rat-men with levelled guns while Joan, with fin-

gers that shook from excitement and haste, quickly buckled one of the Silver Belts around each of them.

The guards rallied from their panic first. At a shrill command from their leader, they began cautiously edging forward toward Joan and Powell. The two gave ground slowly, working their way back over toward the projecting tongue of rock. Out on the end of that narrow strip, Powell knew that he could hold the horde at bay for a few moments at least.

THEY reached the rocky projection, and began backing slowly and carefully out toward its end. The guards, galvanized into action by their captives' retreat, suddenly came surging forward in a furious charge.

Powell emptied the two automatics in a crashing volley that nearly wiped out the charging guards. The few survivors turned and fled in panic back to the main horde. Powell reloaded his clips with feverish haste.

The thousands of rat-men in the main horde were now milling in what was apparently a last moment of hesitation before surging forward in an irresistible stampede toward the beleaguered two out on the rocky strip.

Several bolder individuals at the edge of the horde edged a step forward. Their example was followed by a hundred others. Another hesitant step or two—and then the whole horde was in motion.

Powell swept the front rank with a rain of lead from one of the automatics, holding the other as a reserve. The heavy bullets plowed murder into the close-packed furry bodies. The charge wavered momentarily. Then Powell felt Joan tugging frantically at his arm.

"Larry, the rocks under us are crumbling!" she cried. "We'll be hurled down into the pit!"

Even as she spoke, Powell felt the narrow strip of rock under them quiver and settle. He looked quickly down. All along its length, the narrow rocky projection, weakened by their weight, was breaking swiftly away from the pit's edge. And on the floor of the pit below them the two waiting Devil Crystals moved with musical, tinkling sounds as they waited restlessly for their prey to fall among them.

The horde of rat-men rallied and swept on forward in a wave that nothing could have stopped this time—but their charge was too late. The entire rocky projection collapsed with a final sickening lurch, and slid to the pit's floor, carrying Joan and Powell with it in a miniature avalanche of rocky rubble.

EVEN in the chaos of their wild descent, Powell retained his grip upon the loaded automatic in his hand. They struck the bottom and staggered half-dazed to their feet, to confront the two crystalline monsters rocking on their rounded bases scarcely ten feet away.

The fatal cone-shaped projection was already beginning to form upon the silver-faceted side of the nearest Devil Crystal. Before the lance-like arm of crystal could flash outward, Powell sent two bullets crashing into the crystal's side just over the opalescent nucleus.

The leaden missiles caromed harmlessly off, as though they had struck armor-plate, but the nucleus clouded momentarily and the cone-shaped projection dissolved back into the side.

With lightning speed Powell shifted his aim to the other crystal just as its partly-formed arm was flashing toward them. His bullet crashed into the silvery side squarely over the nucleus. Again the bullet's effect was the same. This crystal nucleus clouded murkily, and the lance-like arm telescoped back into the faceted bulk.

But the effect of the bullets was only momentary. Swiftly the nuclei

of both crystals cleared. A deep blue film, apparently protective in nature, formed between the outer wall and each nucleus. The cones budded, and again the arms started forth.

Powell fired again, and this time uselessly. His bullet struck squarely, but the shock of its impact was apparently nullified by the protective blue film. He emptied his gun in a last crashing fusillade, but without effect of any kind upon the film-guarded nuclei of the giant crystals.

Their forming arms never wavered as they came lancing forward with deadly accuracy straight toward Joan and Powell. In a last effort to save Joan from the terrible doom of the crystal lances as long as possible, Powell flung his own body as a shield in front of the half-fainting girl. The tip of one of the crystalline arms struck his chest with a crashing tinkle of musical glass.

Instantly the tip sprayed into a web of fine filaments that laced on around his body. A tinkling shock raced through his every nerve from the contact with the weird life force of the great crystal.

The arm began contracting. Powell was helpless against the terrific power of the slender, diamond-hard lance of crystal. He felt himself irresistibly drawn toward the silver-faceted wall of the Devil Crystal.

His senses reeled in the babel of alien sounds—the crashing, glass-like music of the crystalline monsters and the snarling, squealing, paean of jubilant triumph from the thousands of rat-men now lining the rim of the pit above.

THEN suddenly the pit, the Devil Crystals, and everything else in the nightmare world of Arret was blotted out in a vast swirling cloud of pulsing roseate flame that seemed to sweep him bodily up into the air and whirl him dizzily around.

His dazed brain staggered from the shock of the cataclysmic force that was disintegrating an entire world around him, but through the utter chaos one thought rang clear and exultant in his consciousness.

Benjamin Marlowe had finally broadcast the recall wave!

For what seemed endless eons of time Powell hurtled through a limitless universe of swirling, tinted fires, while vibrations of a mighty force tingled with poignant ecstasy in every atom of his body.

Then the eddying clouds of flame began to coalesce and solidify with startling suddenness. A moment later, like the abrupt lighting of a room when an electric switch is snapped, the mists vanished and Powell felt firm footing again under his feet. Around him were the familiar objects of Benjamin Marlowe's laboratory.

He was standing upon the floor-plate in the center of the area bounded by the banked green tubes, and beside him stood Joan, sobbing with relief at their last-minute rescue from the Devil Crystals of Arret. And over by the control panel of the recall mechanism was the slight figure of old Benjamin Marlowe, with a great joy now shining in his faded eyes.

ASTOUNDING STORIES

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THE FIRST THURSDAY IN EACH MONTH



Brood of the Dark Moon

PART TWO OF A FOUR-PART NOVEL

By Charles Willard Diffin

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

THE invention of detonite marked the turning point in aerial navigation—that is a matter of common knowledge. It gave us the motive power for the freighters and passenger ships that now fill the air-lanes of the world.

So with the coming of the Dark Moon, in 1973. That is a date known by all, as are the facts of that first exploration of space by Bullard and Harkness. We know that Chet Bullard—Master Pilot of the World—was brought back injured; that Harkness and Diane Delacourt, who had accompanied

Mysterious are the denizens of the Dark Moon, and awful is the spell that lures the three Earthlings into the ominous Pyramid.



One, swifter than the rest, flashed upon him.

them, left the Dark Moon unexplored to send their ship thundering Earthward through space, bearing Bullard in a race with death. But in this account we are concerned with what came after.

Their old enemy, Schwartzmann, causes Harkness' claims to be branded as a hoax. A faked message takes Chet from the hospital. He flies to their hidden workshop in the far north where the ship has been concealed. Schwartzmann follows; seizes the ship; lures Hark-

ness and Diane to the same place and sets out into space with the three as prisoners, planning to maroon them on the Dark Moon and seize its treasures for himself.

The Dark Moon is invisible. Their hurtling ship, due to tremendous acceleration, bears down upon the unseen globe at tremendous speed. Destruction is averted only by the skill of the Master Pilot who takes the controls.

They flash on into space, then return to the mysterious world, descend through the enveloping gas that permits the passage of sunlight to the land below, and search out the Valley of Fires, where the three had been before.

The ship is enveloped in poisonous gas, and Schwartzmann prepares to throw the two men to a certain and horrible death. Diane Delacouer, he tells them, he will keep for himself.

Faced with death for Walt Harkness and himself, and with abandonment of Diane, Chet Bullard swings a heavy bar and sends it crashing through the mechanism of the ship's controls. The "brains" of the ship are a shattered mass. Without this control the great cylinder lies helpless and immovable on the ground.

"Imprisonment for life!" Chet repeats to the horrified Schwartzmann, "—but you didn't know you were sentencing yourself. For you're staying too, Schwartzmann, you contemptible, thieving dog! You're staying with us on the Dark Moon!"

CHAPTER VI

"Six to Four"

PERHAPS to every person in that control room there came, as Chet's quiet, emotionless tones died away, the same mental picture; for there was the same dazed look on the countenances of all.

They were seeing an ocean of space, an endless void of empty black. And across that etheric sea was a whirling globe. They had seen it from afar; they had seen its diminutive continents and its snow-clad poles. . . . They would never see it again. . . .

Earth!—their own world!—home! And now for them it was only a moon, a tremendous, glorious moon, whose apparent nearness would be taunting and calling them each day and night of their lives. . . .

It was Diane Delacouer who dared to break the hard silence that bound them all. From wide eyes she stared at Walt Harkness; then her lips formed a trembling smile in which Chet, too, was included.

"You saved us," she whispered; "you saved us, Chet . . . but now it looks as if we all were exiles."

She crossed slowly, walking like one in a dream, to stand close to Walt Harkness. And Chet Bullard also roused himself; but it was toward the stupefied, hulking figure of Schwartzmann that he moved.

He reached for the detonite pistol, and this man who had been their captor was too stunned to make any resistance. Chet jammed the weapon under his belt.

"Close that port!" he ordered the two men who had half-opened it at Schwartzmann's command. "Keep that poison gas out."

THERE was a flash of color that swept by the open port—some flying creature of vivid crimson: Chet had no time to see what manner of bird or beast it was. But it was alive! He crossed to examine the spectro-analyzer, and the two men disregarded his order and slipped into the rear cabin.

"Seems all clear to me, Walt," he said; and Harkness confirmed his findings with a quick glance.

"O.K.!" he assured Chet; "that air is all right to breathe."

He glanced from a lookout port. "The air's moving now," he said. "That gas—whatever it was—is gone; it must have settled down here in the night. Some new vent that has opened since we were here before.

"But suppose we forget that and settle matters in here," he suggested; and Chet nodded assent.

"Call your men!" Harkness ordered Schwartzmann.

The man had recovered his composure; again his heavy face was flushed beneath a stubble of beard. He made no move to comply with Harkness' demand.

But there was no need: from the cabin at the rear came the scientist, Kreiss. His face was pale and drawn, and he stared long and searchingly at Chet Bullard. His breath still whistled in his throat; the poison gas had nearly done for him.

At his heels were the two who had been working at the port. Two others, who had held Harkness, were drawn off at one side, where they mumbled one to another and shot ugly glances toward Chet.

This, Chet knew, accounted for all. Even the pilot, Max, had roused from the sleep that a blow on the chin had induced and was again on his feet. For him no explanation was needed; the shattered cage of the ball-control told its own story.

Harkness seated Mademoiselle Delacouer on a bench at the pilot's post. "You will want to be in on this," he told her, "but I'll put you here in case they get rough. But don't worry," he added; "we'll be ready for them now."

THEN he turned to Schwartzmann: "Now, you! Oh, there are plenty of things I could call you! And you would understand them perfectly, though they are all words that no gentleman would use."

At Schwartzmann's outburst of profane rejoinder, Harkness broke in with no uncertain tones.

"Shut up, Schwartzmann, and stay that way; I'm giving the orders now. And we'll just cut out all the pleasantries; they won't get us anywhere. We must face the situation, all of us; see what we're up against and make some plans."

But Herr Schwartzmann was not to be put down so easily. He crossed over to where Chet stood. Chet's hand dropped to the pistol that was hooked in his own belt, but Schwartzmann made no move toward it. Instead he planted himself before the pilot and jammed his fists into his hips while he tried to draw his stocky form to equal Chet's slim height.

"Fool!" he said. "Dolt! For a minute I believed you; I thought you had cut us off from the Earth. Now I know better. Max, he understands ships; and the Herr Doctor Kreiss iss a man of science; together they the repairs will make."

The Master Pilot smiled grimly. "Try to do it," he said, and turned toward the two whom Schwartzmann had named. "You, Max, and you, too, Doctor Kreiss—do you want to take on the job? If you do, I will help you."

But the two looked at the shattered controls and shook their heads at their employer.

"Impossible!" the pilot exclaimed. "Without new parts it can never be done."

Schwartzmann seemed about to vent his fury upon the man who dared give such a report, but Doctor Kreiss raised a restraining hand.

"Check!" he said. "I check that report. Repairs are out of the question."

CHET caught Harkness' eye upon him. "I'll be back," Harkness told him and went quickly toward the rear of the ship. Their

stores were back there; would Walt think to get a detonite pistol? He came back into the room while the thought was still in Chet's mind. A gun was in each hand; he passed one of the weapons to Diane.

Unconsciously, Schwartzmann felt for his own gun that was in Chet's belt. He laughed mirthlessly. "Two men," he said scornfully; "two men and a girl!"

Harkness paid no attention. "Now we will get right down to cases," he remarked. "Two men and a girl is right—plus what is left of one ship. And please don't forget that the ship is ours and all the supplies that are in it. Now, you listen to me; I've a few things to tell you."

He faced squarely toward Schwartzmann, and Chet had to repress a grin at the steely glint in his companion's eyes. Nice chap, Harkness—nice, easy-going sort—up to a certain point. Chet had seen him in action before.

"First of all," Harkness was saying, "don't think that we have any illusions about you. You're a killer, and, like all such, you're a coward. If you had the upper hand, you would never give us a chance for our lives. In fact you were ready to throw us out to be gassed when Chet raised your little bet.

"But it looks as if Chet and Mademoiselle Delacouer and I will have to be living on this world for some time. We don't want to start that life by killing off even such as you—not in cold blood. We will give you a chance; we will split our provisions with you—give you half of what we have; you will have to shift for yourselves when that is gone. We will all have to learn to do that."

AGAIN the heavy, glowering face of Schwartzmann broke into a laugh that was half sneer.

"You're damned kind," he told Harkness, "and, as usual, a fool. Two men and a girl!" He half turned to count his own forces.

"There are seven of us," he challenged; "seven! And all of them armed—all but me."

He spoke a curt order in his own tongue, and each man whipped a pistol from his clothes.

"Seven to two," he said, and laughed again; "maybe it iss that Herr Harkness would like to count them.

"*Your* ship and *your* supplies!" he exclaimed scornfully. "And you would be so kind as to giff us food.

"*Gott im Himmel!*" he shouted; "I show you! I am talking now! We stay here—*ja*—because this *Dummkopf* has the controls *gebrochen!* But it iss *we* who stay; und you? You go, because I say so. It iss I who rule, und I prove it—seven to two!"

"Three!" a firm voice spoke from between Chet and Harkness; "seven to three! Our odds are improving, Herr Schwartzmann."

And Chet saw from the corner of his eye that the gun in the small hand of Mademoiselle Diane was entirely unwavering. But he spoke to her sharply, and his voice merged with that of Harkness who was saying somewhat the same words:

"Back—go back, Diane! We can handle this. For God's sake, keep out; we don't want any shooting."

Neither of the men had drawn his gun. Their hands were ready, but each had hoped to end this weird conference without firing a shot. Here was no place for gun-play and for wounded men.

THEIR attention was on Diane for the moment. A growled word from their enemy brought their minds back to him; they turned to find black pistol muzzles staring each of them in the eyes. Herr Schwartzmann, in the language of an earlier day, had got the drop.

"Seven to three," Schwartzmann

said; "let it go that way; no difference does it make. If I say one word, you die."

Chet's arm ached to snap his hand toward his gun. It would be his last move, he well knew. He was sick with chagrin to see how easily they had been trapped; Walt had tried to play fair with a man who had not an atom of fairness in his character. And now—

"Seven to three!" Schwartzmann was gloating—till another voice broke in.

"I don't check your figures." The whistling tones were coming from a tortured throat, but the words were clear and distinct. "I don't check you; I make it six to four—and if one of your men makes a move, Herr Schwartzmann, I shall blow you to a pulp!"

And Herr Doktor Kreiss held a gun in a steady hand as he moved a pace nearer to Chet—a gun whose slender barrel made a glinting line of light toward Schwartzmann's eyes.

"If the gentlemen and Mademoiselle will permit," he offered almost diffidently, "I would prefer to be aligned with them. We are citizens of another world now; my former allegiance to Herr Schwartzmann is ended. This is—what is it you say? —a new deal. I would like to see it; and I use another of your American aphorisms: I would like to see it a square deal."

THE voice of a scholar, thought Chet; one more used to the precision of laboratory phrases than to wild talk like this; but no man to be trifled with, nevertheless. Chet did not hesitate to turn despite the pistols that were still aimed at him.

But Herr Kreiss was not looking in his direction; his eyes were trained steadily in the same line as his gun. This little experiment he was conducting seemed to require his undivided attention until the end. To Schwartzmann he said sharply:

"Your men—order them to drop their weapons. Quick!"

As they clattered upon the floor the scientist turned and extended his hand to Chet.

"And still speaking not too technically," he continued, "this is one hell of a fix that you have got us into. Even in desperate straits it took nerve to do that." He pointed to the shattered remains of the multiple bars that had been the control mechanism, and added:

"I admire that kind of nerve. And, if you don't mind, since we are exiles together—" His throat seemed choking him again.

There were weapons in the hands of Chet and Harkness; they were not making the same mistake twice. Chet shifted his gun to his left hand that he might reach toward the scientist with his right.

"I knew you were white all the time," Chet told him; "I'll say you belong!"

CHAPTER VII

The Red Swarm

IT was a matter of a half hour later when Harkness ordered them all outside. He had accepted Kreiss as an addition to their ranks and had made himself plain to Schwartzmann.

To the scientist he said, "You remarked that no ship could hold two commanding pilots; that goes for an expedition like this, too. I am in command. If you will take orders we will be mighty glad to have you with us."

And to Schwartzmann, in a different tone: "I am sparing you and your men. I ought to shoot you down, but I won't. And I don't expect you to understand why; any decency such as that would be beyond you.

"But I am letting you live. This

world is big enough to hold us both, and pretty soon I will tell you what part of it you can live in. And then remember this one thing, Schwartzmann—get this straight!—you keep out of my way. I will show you a valley where you and your men can stay. And if ever you leave that valley I will hunt you down as I would one of the beasts that you will see in this world."

Chet had to repress a little smile that was twitching at his lips; it always amused him hugely to see Harkness when roused.

"Turn us out to starve?" Schwartzmann was demanding. "You would do that?"

"There will be food there," said Harkness curtly; "suit yourself about starving. Only stay where I put you!"

Back of the others of Schwartzmann's men, the pilot, Max, was stooping. Half-hidden he moved toward the doorway to the rear cabin and to the storage-room and gun-rooms beyond. Chet glimpsed him in his silent retreat.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, Max," he advised quietly. "Personally, I think you're all getting off too well; as for myself, I'm sort of itching for an excuse to let off this gun."

It was here that Harkness turned to the open port.

"Put them out!" he snapped. "You, Chet, go out first and line them up as they come—but, no, wait: there may be gas out there."

CHET was beside the port; a breath from outside came to him sweetly fragrant. A shadow was moving across the smooth lava rock. "A bird!" he thought. Then a flash of red in startling vividness swept past the open door; it was like a quick flicker of living flame. He could not see what it was, but it was alive—and that answered his question.

"Send 'em along," he said; "it seems all right now." He stepped through the opening in the heavily insulated walls.

It was early morning, yet the sun was already hot upon the smooth expanse of the lava flow. Some ancient eruption from the distant peaks that hemmed in the valley had sent out this flood of molten rock; it was hard and black now. But, to the right, where the valley went on and up, and rose gently and widened as it rose, a myriad of red flames and jets of steam told of the inner fires that still raged.

These were the fumeroles where only a month before he and Harkness and Diane had found clustering savages who were more apes than men; they had been roasting meat at these flames. And below, where the lava stopped, was the open glade where the little stream splashed and sparkled: in the high rock walls that hemmed the glade the caves showed black. And, beyond the open ground, was the weird forest, where tree-trunks of ghostly white were laced with a network of red veining. They grew close, those spectral columns, in a shadow-world beneath the high roof of greenery they supported.

Here was the scene of an earlier adventure. Chet was swept up in the flood of recollections born of familiar sights and scents. Herr Schwartzmann, cursing steadily in a guttural tongue, came from the ship to bring Chet's thoughts back to the more immediate problem.

THERE were five others who followed—the pilot and Schwartzmann's four men. There had been another, but his body lay huddled upon the bare lava. He had followed his master far—and here, for him, was the end.

Kreiss' pistol was still in his hand as he came after. Harkness and Diane were last.

Harkness pointed with his gun. "Over there!" he ordered. "Get them away from the ship, Chet. Line them up down below there; all the ape-men have cleared out since we had our last fight. Get them down by the stream. Diane and I will bring them some supplies, and then we can send them off for good."

Chet sent Kreiss down first, where an easy slope made the descent a simple matter; it had been the bow-wave of the molten lava—here was the end of that inundation of another age—and the slope was wrinkled and creased. Schwartzmann followed; then the others. The last man was ready to descend when Diane and Walt came back.

They had packages of compressed foods. This was all right with Chet, but he raised his eyebrows inquiringly at sight of several boxes of ammunition and an extra gun. Harkness smiled good-naturedly.

"I will give them one pistol," Walt told him, "and a good supply of shells. We don't need to be afraid of them with only one gun, and we can't leave the poor devils at the mercy of every wild beast."

"You're the boss," said Chet briefly; "but, for me, I'd sooner give this Schwartzmann just one bullet—right where it would do the most good.

"Let's make him work for it," he suggested, and called to the men below:

"Come back up here, Schwartzmann! A little present for you—and I'm saying you don't deserve it."

He watched the return trip as Schwartzmann dragged his heavy bulk up the slope; he was enjoying the man's explosive, panted curses. Beside him were Diane and Walt. With them, it was as it had been with him at first. They had eyes only for the familiar ground below: the stream, the open ground, the trees. . . .

EACH of them was looking down at that lower ground. It was Kreiss standing down there who first caught Chet's attention. Kreiss was trying to shout. Chet saw his waving arms; he stared, puzzled, at the facial contortions—the working lips from which no sound came. He knew that something was wrong. It was a moment or two before he realized that Kreiss could not speak, that the throat, injured by the choking fumes, had failed him. Then he heard the strangled croak that Kreiss forced from his lips: *"Behind you!—look behind you!"*

Schwartzmann was scrambling to the top where they stood; every man was accounted for. What had they to fear? And suddenly it was borne in upon Chet's consciousness that he had been hearing a sound—a sound that was louder now—a rustling!—a clashing of dry, rasping things! The very air seemed to hold something ominous.

He knew this in the instant while he whirled about; while he heard the dry rustling change to a humming roar; while he saw, like a cloud of flame, a great swarm of red, flying things like the one that had flown past the port—and one, swifter than the rest, that darted from the swarm and flashed upon him.

It was red—vividly, dazzlingly red! The body of a reptile—a wild phantasm of distorted dreams—was supported by short, quivering wings. The body was some five feet in length, and it was translucent.

A shell, like the dried husk of some creature long dead!—yet here was something alive, as its quick attack proved. It had a head of dry scales which ended in a projecting black-tipped beak that came like a sword, straight and true for Chet's heart. It seemed an age before he could bring his pistol up and fire.

DETONITE, as everyone knows, does not explode on impact; the cap of fulminate in the end of each bullet sets it off. But even this requires some resistance—something more than a dry, red husk to check the bullet's flight. There was no explosion from the tiny shell that Chet's pistol fired, but the bullet did its work. The creature fell plunging to the rocky ground, and its transparent wings sent flurries of dust where they beat upon the ground. There were others that went down, for the bullet had gone on and through the great swarm.

And then they attacked.

The very fury of the assault saved the huddle of humans. So close were the red things pressed together that their vibrating wings beat and locked the swarm into a mass. They were almost above their prey. Chet knew that he was firing upward into the swarm, but the sound of his pistol was lost. The red cloud hung poised in a whirling maelstrom; and the pandemonium of clashing wings whipped down to them not only the sound of their dry scraping but a stench from those reptile bodies that was overpowering.

Sickly sweet, the taste of it was in Chet's mouth; the sound of the furious swarm was battering at his ears as he knew that his pistol was empty.

There were red bodies on the bare rock before him. A scaly, scabrous thing was pressing against his upflung hands that he raised above his head—a loathsome touch! A beak that was a needle-pointed tube stabbed his shoulder before he could flinch aside: the quick pain of it was piercingly sharp. . . .

OTHER red horrors dropped from the main mass overhead: he saw Harkness beating at them wildly while he made a shelter of his body above the crouched figure of Diane. Two of them—two incredible, beastly, flying things! He saw them so plainly where they hovered, and Harkness striking at them with a useless, empty gun, while they waited to drive home their lance-like beaks.

The picture was so plain! His brain was a photographic plate, super-sensitized by the utter horror of the moment. While the red monster stabbed its beak into his shoulder, while he drove home one blow against its parchment body with his empty pistol, while the wild, beating wings lifted the creature again into the air—he saw it all.

Here were Diane and Harkness! Nearby Schwartzmann was on the ground! His man—the one who had not yet descended with the others—was running stumblingly forward. He was wounded, and the blood was streaming from his back. Chet saw the two monsters hovering above Harkness' head; he saw their thick-lidded eyes—and he saw those eyes as they detected an easier prey.

The fleeing man was half-stooped in a shambling run. The winged reptile Chet had beaten off joined the other two and they were upon the wounded man in a flurry of red.

Chet saw him go down and took one involuntary step forward to give him aid—then stopped, transfixed by what he beheld.

The man was down crouching in terror. Above him the three monstrous things beat each other with their wings; then their long beaks stabbed downward. The man's body was hidden, but through those transparent beaks there mounted swiftly a red stream. Plainly visible. Chet saw that vital current—the living life-blood of a living man—drawn into those beastly bodies: he saw it spread through a network of canals! And he was held rigid with horror until a harsh scream from Harkness reached his brain.

"The trees!" Harkness was shouting. "The trees! Down, Chet, for God's sake! You can't save him!"

WALT was half carrying Diane. Even then Chet was vaguely thankful that their bodies were between the girl and this gruesome sight. And Walt was leaping madly down the lava slope.

Beyond him, already on the lower level, was the racing figure of Schwartzmann. A whirring flash of red pursued him. Another made a crimson streak through the air toward Walt's back. Chet came with startling abruptness from the frozen rigidity that held him, and he crashed his empty pistol in well-directed aim through the body of the beast. Then he, too, threw himself in great leaps down the slope.

Kreiss was firing from below; Chet knew dimly that this was checking the attack of the swarm. He saw Walt stagger; saw blood flowing from a slash on the back of his head, and knew that Kreiss had got the monster just in time. He sprang toward the stumbling man and got his arms under the unconscious figure of the girl to help carry the load.

And now it was Kreiss who was shouting. "The trees! We'll be safe in the trees!" He saw Kreiss drop his pistol and dash headlong for the white trunks of ghostly trees.

His arm was pierced by a stinging pain; cold eyes, with thick, leathery lids, were staring into Chet's as he cast one horrified glance over his shoulder. Then he crashed against the white trunk of a tree and helped Harkness drag the body of the girl between two twin trunks. He pulled himself to safety in the shelter of the protecting trees, and held weakly to one of them. . . . And the crimson lacework of the sap-wood that showed through the white bark was no brighter red than the mark of his blood-stained hands where they clung for support.

CHAPTER VIII

Doomed

THE sun was high when they ventured forth. Diane would have come, but the two men would have none of it. They remembered the sight they had seen; they knew what was left of a man's body lying on the rocks above; and they ordered the girl to stay hidden while Kreiss remained with her as a guard.

There were only the four who lay hidden in the woods; Schwartzmann and Max, with the remaining three men, were gone. Harkness' calls were unanswered, and he ceased the halloo.

"Better keep quiet," he advised himself and the others. "We are out of ammunition, though they don't know it. And they have got away. They will keep on going, too, and I am not any too well pleased with that. I wanted to put Schwartzmann where I could keep an eye on him. . . . Oh, well, he isn't very dangerous."

But Chet Bullard made a few mental and unspoken reservations to that remark. "That boy is always dangerous," he told himself, "and he won't be happy unless he is making trouble. Thank the Lord he hasn't got that gun!"

He came out cautiously from among the trees, but the red horde was gone. The reptiles' wings had rasped and clashed furiously for a time; they had darted in fiery flashes before the protecting trees: and the fitful breeze had brought gusts of nauseous odors—until a thin haze formed in the higher air and the red things were gone.

"There will not be any more for a while," said Harkness.

He pointed toward the fumerole they had seen from the lookout earlier in the day; again it was emitting jets of thin, steamy vapor that did not disappear like steam but floated up above their heads. "The gas has driven them off," he added.

THE two men climbed slowly up the slope that had been the wave front of molten rock. Chet found his pistol by the path and picked it up.

"We'll get more ammunition up top," he told Harkness, "and we will toss some down to Kreiss. He can have the extra gun you brought for Schwartzmann, too."

He stopped suddenly. He had reached the level top of the lava flow. Here was where they had stood when the beasts attacked; where Harkness had dropped the boxes of ammunition and the pistol—and except for a few scattered bodies of unbelievable reptiles and for a stain of blood where his own wound had bled, there was nothing to show where they had been.

"He got 'em!" Chet exclaimed. "That son-of-a-gun Schwartzmann got the gun and shells. I saw him scrambling around on the rock. I thought he was just scared to death; but no, he wasn't too frightened to grab the gun and the ammunition while one of his own men was being killed. And that's not so good, either!"

A dozen paces beyond was a huddle of clothing that stirred idly in the breeze. "The poor devil!" exclaimed Chet, and moved over beside the body of the man who had gone down under the red swarm's attack.

It lay face down. Chet stooped to turn the body over, though he knew there was no hope of life. He stopped with a gasp of dismay.

Two eyes still stared in horror from a face that was colorless—a drained, ghastly white face! No tint remained to show that this ever had been a living man. More dreadful than the waxen pallor of death, here was a bleached, bloodless flesh that told of the nameless horror that had overwhelmed this man, beaten him down and drained him of every drop of blood.

"Vampires!" Chet heard Harkness saying in a horrified whisper. "Those beaks that were like tubes! And they—they—" He stopped as if in fear of the words that would tell what they themselves had escaped.

Chet turned the body to its former position; that dreadful face beneath a pitiless sun was a sight no other eyes should see. "Let's go on to the ship," he said. "We'll get some ammunition, go back and get Diane—"

HE did not finish the thought. Before him he saw the lifeless body moving; it rolled and shuddered as if life had returned to this thing where no life should be. Chet raised one hand in an unconscious gesture as if to ward off some new horror that the body might disclose. It was a moment before he realized that the rock was shaking beneath his feet, that he was dizzy and that from no great distance a rumbling growl was sounding in his ears.

The moving body had shaken Chet's mental poise as had the earthquake his physical equilibrium. Harkness had not seen it; he was looking off across the level plateau.

"Look!" he exclaimed; "another vent has opened! See it spout?"

Some hundred yards distant were clouds of green vapor that rolled into the air. At their base a fountain of mud sputtered and spouted and fell back to build up a cone. The green cloud whirled sluggishly, then was caught by the breeze and began its slow, rolling progress across the flat rock. It was coming

their way, rolling down toward the ship, and Chet gripped suddenly at his companion's arm.

"Come on!" he said! "I'm going away from here, and I'm going now. We'll get Diane and Kreiss: remember what a whiff of gas did to him this morning."

He was drawing Harkness toward the face of the rock; he wondered at his slowness. Walt seemed fascinated by the oncoming cloud.

"Wait!" Harkness paused at the top of the descending slope. Chet turned, to look where Harkness was watching.

The green cloud moved slowly. As he turned to stare it touched the bow of their ship; it flowed slowly, sluggishly, along the sides, and then swept up and over the top. The lookouts of the control room were obscured, and the port from which they had come!

"Cut off!" breathed Harkness, his voice heavy with hopeless conviction. "We can't get back! And now we're on our own past any doubt!"

"IT may not last," Chet was urging an hour later, when, with Kreiss and Diane, they stood on high ground to look down on the ship.

The sparkling sheen of the metal cylinder had changed from silver to pale green. The cloud that enveloped it was not heavy, but it was always the same. Yet still Chet insisted: "It may not last."

"Sorry to disappoint you," replied Kreiss, "but there is little ground for such a belief." Again he was the professor instructing a class. "These fumeroles, in my opinion, are venting a region far below the surface. It is possible that further seismic disturbances may alter conditions: a rearrangement of the lower rock strata may close existing crevices and open others like this you have seen; but, barring that, I see no reason for thinking that this emission of what appears to be chlorine with other gases may not continue indefinitely."

Chet looked at Diane. Was it a twinkle that appeared and vanished in her eyes as Herr Professor Kreiss concluded his remarks. She would laugh in the very face of death, Chet realized, but her tone was entirely serious as she offered another suggestion.

"If this wind should change," she said, "and if it blew the gas in another direction, the ship could be cleared. One of us could go in long enough to switch on the air generators full."

But now it was Chet who shook his head in a negative. "Remember," he told her, "when we were here before? All of the time while Walt was gone for the ship—how did the wind blow then?"

"The same as now," she admitted.

"And it never changed."

"No,"—slowly—"it never changed."

CHET turned to Walt and Kreiss. "That's that," he said shortly. "Any other good ideas in the crowd? Can anyone go through that gas and get to the ship? I'll make a try."

"Suicide!" was Kreiss' verdict, and Harkness confirmed his words.

"I saw things that moved up in the trees," he said. "Lord know what they were; Birds—beasts of some sort! But they were alive till the gas touched them. I saw it drift among the trees when we left, and those things up there came plopping down like ripe apples."

Diane Delacouer looked up at Harkness with wide, serious eyes. "Then," she shrugged, "we are really—"

"Castaways," Harkness told her. "We're on our own—off on a desert island—shipwrecked—all that sort of thing! And you might as well know the worst of it: you, too, Kreiss.

"Our good friend, Schwartzmann, is at large, and he has the pistol and ammunition we brought out from the ship. He is armed, and we are not; he has food, and we have none. And I'll have to admit that I didn't have any breakfast and could use a little right now."

"There are seven shells left in my pistol," said Diane. She held the weapon out to Harkness; he took it carefully.

"Seven," he said; "it is all we have. We must kill some animals for food, my dear, but not with these; we must save these for bigger game."

"But we cannot!" expostulated Kreiss. "To kill game with our bare hands—impossible! We are doomed!"

And now Chet caught Diane's glance brimming with mirth that was undisguised. Truly, Diane Delacouer would have her laugh in the face of death.

"Doomed?" she exclaimed. "Not while Chet and I know how to make bows and arrows! . . . Do you suppose we can find any of their old spears, Chet? They made gorgeous bows, you remember."

And Chet bowed low in an exaggeration of admiration that was not entirely assumed. "Lead on!" he said. "You are in command. The army is ready to follow."

CHAPTER IX

A Premonition

FIRE Valley had been the home of the ape-men. On that earlier journey Walt and Chet had seen them, had fought with the tribe, and had lived for a time in their caves that made dark shadows high on the rock wall. And they knew that the wood the ape-men used for their spears was well suited for bows.

Back in the caves they found discarded spears and some wood that had been gathered for shafts. Tough, springy, flexible, it was a simple matter for the men to convert these into serviceable weapons. Sinews that the ape-men had torn from great beasts made the bowstrings, and there were other slim shafts that they notched, then sharpened in the fire.

Yet, to Chet as he worked, came an overwhelming feeling of despondency. To be fashioning crude weapons like these—preparing to defend themselves as best they could from the dangers of this new, raw world! No, it could not be true. . . . And he knew while he protested that it was all in vain.

He asked himself a score of times if his impulsive, desperate act had not been a horrible mistake. And he found the same answer always: it was all he could have done. Had he attacked Schwartzmann he would have been killed—and Walt, too! Schwartzmann would have had Diane. Only some such stupefying shock as the effect of the shattered control could have checked Schwartzmann. No, there had been no alternative. And the thing was done. Finally, irrevocably done!

CHET walked to the cave-mouth to stare down at the ship below him in the valley. From the fumerole's throat came a steady, rolling cloud of shimmering green; the ship was immersed in it. The voice of Herr Kreiss spoke to him; the scientist, too, had come forward for another look.

"If it were at the bottom of the sea," he said, "it would be no more inaccessible. It is, in very fact, at the bottom of a sea—a sea of gas. We could penetrate an aqueous medium more easily."

"And," Chet pondered slowly, "if only I could have returned. . . . With time—and metal bars—and tools that I could improvise—I might. . . ."

His voice trailed off. What use now to speculate on what he might have done. The scientist concluded his thought:

"You might have reconstructed the control—yes, I, too, had thought of that. But now, the gas! No—we must put that out of our minds unless we would become insane."

Chet turned back into the black and odorous cave. He saw Harkness who was flexing a bow he was making for Diane; he was showing her how to grip it and let the arrow run free.

"Towahg was the last one I instructed," Walt was saying; and Chet knew from the deep lines in his face that his attempt at casual talk was for Diane's benefit; "I wonder how long Towahg remembered. He was a grateful little animal."

"Towahg?" queried Kreiss. "Who is Towahg?"

"Ape-man," Harkness told him. "Friendly little rascal; he helped us out when we were here before. He saved Diane's life, no question about that. I showed him the use of the bow; jumped him ahead a hundred generations in the art of self-defense."

"And offense!" was Kreiss' comment. "There are certain drawbacks to arming a potential enemy."

"Oh, Towahg is all right," Harkness reassured the scientist, "although he may have taught the trick to others of the tribe who are not so friendly."

"Where are they? In what direction do they live?" Kreiss continued.

"Want to make a social call?" Chet inquired. "You needn't mind those little formalities up here, Doctor."

BUT in the mental makeup of Herr Doktor Kreiss had been included no trace of humor; he took Chet's remark at face value. And he answered in words that echoed Chet's real thoughts and that took the smile from his lips.

"But, no," said Herr Kreiss; "it is the contrary that I desire. Here we are; here we stay for the rest of our lives. I would wish those years to be undisturbed. I have no wish to quarrel with what primitive inhabitants this globe may hold. There is much to study, to learn. I shall pass the years so.

"And now," he questioned, "where is it that we go? Where shall be our home?"

Chet, too, looked inquiringly at Harkness. "You saw more of this country than I did," he reminded him; "what would you suggest?"

And, at sight of the serious, troubled eyes of Diane Delacouer, he added:

"We want a site for a high-grade subdivision, you understand. Something good, something exclusive, where we can keep out the less desirable element. Dianeville must appeal to the people who rate socially."

At the puzzled look on the scientist's face, Chet caught Diane's glance of unspoken amusement, and knew that his ruse had succeeded: he must not let Diane get too serious. Harkness answered slowly:

"I saw a valley; I think I can find it again. When Towahg guided me back to the ship, when we were here before, I saw the valley beyond the third range of hills. We go up Fire Valley; follow the stream that comes in from the side—"

"Water?" Chet questioned.

"Yes; I saw a lake."

"Cover? Trees? Not the man-eating ones?"

"Everything: open ground, hills, woods. It looked good to me then; it will look a lot better now," said Walt enthusiastically.

"Walk faster," said Chet; "I'm stepping on your heels."

THEY reached the valley floor some distance above the fumerole and the clouds of poison gas; and the march began. The attack of the flying reptiles had taught them the danger of exposure in the open, and they kept close to the trees that fringed the valley.

Once Chet left them and vanished among the trees, to return with the body of an animal slung over one shoulder.

"Moon-pig!" he told the others. "Ask Doctor Kreiss if you want to know its species and ancestry and such things All I know is that it has got hams, and I am going to roast a slice or so before we start."

"Bow and arrow?" asked Harkness.

Chet nodded "I'm a dead shot," he admitted, "up to a range of ten feet. This thing with the funny face stood still for me, so it looks as if we won't starve."

The sun had swung rapidly into the sky; it was now overhead. One half of their first short day was gone. And Chet's suggestions of food met with approval.

"I can't quite get used to it," Diane admitted to the rest; "to think that for us time has turned back. We have been dropped into a new and savage world, and we must do as the savages of our world did thousands of years ago. Now!—in nineteen seventy-three!"

Chet removed a slab of meat from the hot throat of a tiny fumerole. "Nineteen seventy-three on Earth," he agreed, "but not here. This is about nineteen thousand B.C."

HE called to Kreiss who was digging into a thin stratum of rock. The scientist had a splinter of flint in his hand, and he was gouging at a red outcropping layer.

"Old John Q. Neanderthal, himself!" said Chet. "What have you found, silver or gold? Whatever it is, you're forgetting to eat; better come along." But Doctor Kreiss had turned geologist, it was plain.

"Cinnabar," he said; "an ore of hydrargyrum!" His tone was excited, but Chet refused to have his mind turned from practical things.

"Is it good to eat?" he demanded.

"*Nein, nein!*" Kreiss protested. "It is what you call mercury—quicksilver!"

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Chet dryly, "I see where this man Kreiss is to be a big help. He has discovered the site for the thermometer factory. He will be organizing a Chamber of Commerce next."

He left out a portion of the cooked meat for Kreiss' later attention, and he and Harkness rolled a supply into leaf-wrapped packages and stowed them in the pockets of their coats before they started on. Again the little procession took up the march with Harkness leading.

"Leave as little trail as possible," Harkness ordered. "We don't want to shout to Schwartzmann where we have gone."

They left the Valley of the Fires to follow the stream-bed in another hollow between great hills. Chet found himself looking back at the familiar flares with regret. Here was the only place on this new world which was not utterly strange to his eyes. He continued to glance behind him long after the smoky fires were lost to sight; but he would not admit even to himself that it was for another reason.

Ninteen seventy-three!—and he was a man of the modern civilization. Yet deep within him there stirred ancient instincts—racial memories, perhaps. And, as he splashed through the little stream and bent to make his way through strange-leafed vines and leprous-spotted trees, a warning voice spoke inaudibly within his own mind—spoke as it might have whispered

to some ancestor scores of centuries dead.

"You are followed!" it told him. "Listen!—there is one who follows on the trail!"

CHAPTER X

A Mysterious Rescuer

THEIR way led through tangled growths of trees and vines that were like unreal things of a dream. Unreal they were, too, in their strange degree of livingness, for there were snaky tendrils that drew back as if in fear at their approach and stalks that folded great, thorny leaves protectingly about pulpy centers at the first touch of a hand. The world of vegetation seemed strangely sentient and aware of their approach. Only the leprous-white trees remained motionless; their red-veined trunks towered high in air, and the sun of late afternoon shot slantingly through a leafy roof overhead.

Twice Chet let the others go on ahead while he slipped silently into some rocky concealment and watched with staring, anxious eyes back along their trail. But the little stream's gurgling whisper was the only voice, and in all the weird jungle there was no movement but for the unfolding of the vegetation where they had passed.

"Nerves!" he reproached himself. "You're getting jumpy, and that won't do." But once more he let the others climb on while he stepped quickly behind a projecting rock over which he could look.

Again there was silence; again the leaves unfolded their thorny wrappings while vermiform tendrils crept across the ground or reached tentatively into the air. And then, while the silence was unbroken, while no evidence came through his feeble, human senses, something approached.

Neither sight nor sound betrayed it—this something that came noiselessly after—but a tell-tale plant whipped its leaves into their former wrapping; a vine drew its hanging clusters of flowers sharply into the air. The unseeing watchers of the forest had sensed what was unheard and unseen, and Chet knew that his own inner warning had been true.

He waited to see this mysterious pursuer come into view; and after waiting in vain he realized the folly of thinking himself concealed. He glanced about him; every plant was drawn tightly upon itself. With silent voices they were proclaiming his hiding place, warning this other to wait, telling him that someone was hidden here.

Chet's face, despite his apprehension, drew into a whimsical, silent grin. "No chance to ambush him, whoever he is or whatever it is," he told himself. "But that works two ways: he can't jump us when we're prepared; not in daylight, anyway."

And he asked himself a question he could not answer: "I wonder," he whispered softly, "—I wonder what these plants will do at night!"

ALMOST they could see the swift descent of the sun. Each flashing glint of light through the dense growth came from lower down toward the invisible horizon. It shone at last where Chet cast anxious glances about upon a mound of rocks.

Rough blocks of tremendous size had been left here from some seismic disturbance. Like the ruins of a castle they were heaped high in air. Even the tree growths stopped at their base, and above them was an opening in the roof of tangled branches and leaves—a rough circle of clear, blue sky.

"How about making camp?" Chet asked. "This place looks good to me. I would just as soon be up off the ground a bit."

Harkness looked at the pile of rocks; glanced once toward the sun. "Right!" he agreed. "This will do for our first camp."

"You've named it," Chet told him as he scrambled to the top of a great block. He extended a hand to Diane, standing tired and breathless at its side.

"Welcome to First Camp!" he told her. "Take this elevator for the first ten floors."

He drew her up to the top of the block. Harkness joined them, and Diane, though she tried to smile in response to Chet, did not refuse their help in making the ascent; the day's experiences had told on all of them.

Thirty or forty feet above the ground was Chet's estimate. From the top of their little fort they watched the shadows of night sweep swiftly down. Scrub tree growths whose roots had anchored among the rocks gave them shelter, while vines and mosses softened the hard outlines of the labyrinth of stones.

CHET undid the package of meat and passed it out freely. There had been scurryings and rustlings in the jungle growth that had reassured him in the matter of food. Darkness fell as they ate; then it gave way to a new flood of light.

Golden light from a monstrous moon! It sent searching fingers through rifts in the leafy roof, then poured itself over the edge of the opening above in a cascade of glory. And, though each one of the four raised his eyes toward that distant globe and knew it for the Earth, no word was said; they ate their food in silence while the silent night wrapped them about.

Still in silence they prepared for the night. Chet and Harkness improvised a bed for Diane in the shelter of a sheer-rising rock. They tore off pieces of moss and stripped leaves from the climbing vines to make a mattress for her; then withdrew with Kreiss to a short distance while Chet told them of his suspicions.

"Six hours of night," he said at last; "that means two hours for each of us. We'll take turns standing guard."

Harkness insisted upon being first. Chet flipped a coin with Kreiss and drew the last turn of guard duty. He stretched himself out on a bit of ground where vegetation had gained a foothold among the rocks.

"It's going to take me a while to get used to these short days," he said. "Six hours of daylight; six hours of night. This is a funny, little world—but it's the only one we've got."

The night air was softly warm; the day had been hard on muscles and nerves. Chet stared toward the glorious ball of light that was their moon. There were men and women there who were going about their normal affairs. Ships were roaring through the air at their appointed levels; their pilots were checking their courses, laughing, joking.

CHET resolutely withdrew his eyes. Think? Hell, no! That was one thing that he must not do. He threw one arm across his eyes to shut out the light that brought visions of a world he would never see again—that emphasized the utter hopelessness of their position. . . . His next conscious sensation was of his shoulder being shaken, while the hushed voice of Doctor Kreiss said:

"Your turn now, Herr Bullard; four hours have you slept."

From Kreiss, Chet took the pistol with its seven precious shells. "All quiet," Kreiss told him as he prepared to take Chet's place on the soft leaves; "strange, flying things have I seen, but they do not come near. And of your mysteri-

ous pursuer we have seen nothing. You imagined it, perhaps."

"I might have imagined it," Chet answered, "but don't try to tell me that the plants did. I'll give this vegetation credit for some damned uncanny powers but not for imagination—I draw the line there."

He looked toward the highest point of rock and shook his head. "Too plain a target if I'm up there," he argued, and took up his position in the shadows instead.

Once he moved cautiously toward the place they had prepared for Diane. She was breathing softly and regularly. And on the rock at her side, with only his jacket for a bed, lay Harkness. Their hands were clasped, and Chet knew that the girl slept peacefully in the assurance of that touch.

"They don't make 'em any finer!" he was telling himself, and at the same moment he stiffened abruptly to attention.

Something was moving! Through and above the hushed noises of the night had come a gliding sound. It was an indescribable sound, too elusive for identification; and Chet, in the next instant, could not be sure of its reality. He did not call, but swung alertly back on guard and slipped from shadow to shadow as he made his way across the welter of rocks.

HE stopped at last in strained listening to the silent night. One hand upon a great stone block at his side steadied his body in tense, poised concentration.

From afar came a whistling note whose thin keenness was mingled with a squeal of fright: some marauder of the night had found its prey. From the leafy canopy above him voices whispered as the night wind set a myriad leaves in motion. The thousand tiny sounds that blend to make the silence of the dark! These he heard, and nothing more, while he forced himself to listen beyond them. He followed with his eyes the creeping flood of Earth-light that came slantingly now through the opening above to half-illumine this rocky world; and then, in the far margin of that light he found something on which his eyes focused sharply—something that moved!

Walt!—Kreise—he must arouse them! A shout of alarm was in his throat—a shout that was never uttered. For, from the darkness at his back—not where this moving thing had been disclosed by the friendly Earth-light, but from the place he had just left—came a scream of pure terror. It was the shocking scream of a person roused from sleep in utter fright, and the voice was that of Diane.

"Walter!" she cried! "Walt!" There were other words that ended in a strangling, choking sound, while a hoarse shout from Harkness merged into a discord that rang horribly through the still night.

CHET was racing across the rocks; the pistol was in his hand. What fearful thing would he face? What was it that had attacked? He forced his leaden feet to carry him on in a succession of wild leaps. Forgotten was the menace behind him, although he half saw, half sensed, a shadow that moved faster than he along the upper rocks. He thought only of the unknown horror that was ahead, that had drawn that despairing shriek from the brave lips of Diane. The few seconds of his crossing were an age in length.

One last spring, one vivid instant while the Earth-light marked in sharp distinctness the figure of a leaping man! It was Harkness, throwing himself into the air, trying vainly to reach the struggling form of Diane Delacouer. She was

held high above his head, and she was wrapped in the coils of a monster serpent—coils that finished in a smoothly-rounded end. And Chet knew in that instant of horror that the thing was headless!

He was raising his pistol to fire; the long moments that seemed never to end were in actuality an instant. Where should he aim? He must not injure Diane.

From the high rocks beside him came a glint of light, a straight line of reflected brilliance as from a poised and slender shaft. It moved, it flashed downward, it hissed angrily as it passed close to Chet's head. It went on, a spear like a flash of light—on and down, to drive sharply into the body of that serpent shape! And the coils, at that blow, relaxed, while the figure of Diane Delacouer fell limply to the outstretched, cushioning arms of the man below. . . .

HAD the weapon been thrown with uncanny accuracy, or had it been meant for him? Chet could not be sure. But he knew that before him Walt Harkness was bending protectingly above the unconscious figure of a girl, while above and about the two there flailed a terrible, headless thing that beat the rocks with sledge-hammer blows. It struck Harkness once and sent him staggering, and once it came close to Chet so that his hands closed upon it for an instant. And with the touch he knew that this serpent was no animal shape, but worse—a creeping tendril from some flesh-eating horror of the vegetable world.

He dashed in beside Walt; he saw Kreiss hurrying across the rocks. They had Diane safely out of reach of the thrashing, striking thing before the scientist arrived.

The spear that had passed close to Chet had pinned this deadly thing to earth; it tore loose as they watched, and the wounded tendril, with the spear still hanging from its side, slid swiftly down the slope and into the darkness at the foot of the rocks.

Even the calm preciseness of Herr Kreiss was shattered by the attack. In a confusion of words he stammered questions that went unanswered. Chet thrust his pistol into Harkness' hands and was off down the rocky slope toward the springs where they had got water for their evening meal. A rolled leaf made a cup that he held carefully while he climbed back. A few minutes later the pallid face of Diane showed a faint flush, while she drew a choking breath.

HARKNESS held the girl's head in his arms; he was uttering words of endearment that were mingled with vicious curses for the thing that had escaped.

"Never mind that," argued Chet; "that one won't bother us again, and after this we will be on guard. But here is something to wonder about. What about this spear? Where did it come from?"

Harkness had eyes only for Diane's tremulous smile. "I am all right, truly," she assured him. Only then did he turn in bewilderment to Chet.

"I thought you threw it! But of course not; you couldn't; we didn't have any spears."

"No," said Chet; "I didn't throw it. I saw something moving over across there"—he pointed toward the farther rocks where he had been— "I was going to call when Diane's scream beat me to it. But what I saw wasn't the thing that attacked her. And if it was the same one who threw that spear he must have come across here in a hurry. And that spear, by the way, came uncomfortably close to my head. I'm not at all sure but it was meant for me."

Harkness released his arms from Diane, for she was now able to sit erect. He picked up the crude bow that had been beside him and fitted an arrow to the string.

"I'll go and have a look," he promised grimly. But Chet held him back.

"You're not thinking straight; this shock has knocked you out of control. If that little stranger with the spear meant to help us there's no need of hunting him out; he doesn't seem anxious to show himself. And if he meant it for me, he's still too good a shot to fool with in the dark. You stick here until daylight."

"That is good advice," Herr Kreiss agreed. "The night, it will soon be gone." He was looking at the leafy opening overhead where the golden light of a distant Earth was fading before the glow of approaching day.

CHAPTER XI

The Sacrificial Altar

"I AM off the trail," Harkness admitted. "Towahg guided me before; I wish he were here to do it now."

They had pushed on for another short day, Harkness leading, and Chet bringing up the rear and casting frequent backward glances in a vain effort to catch a glimpse of some other moving figure.

Smothered at times in a dense tangle of vegetation, where they sweated and worked with aching muscles to tear a path; watching always for the flaming, crimson buds on grotesque trees, whose limbs were waving, undulating arms and from which came tendrils like the one that had nearly ended Diane's life, they fought their way on.

They had seen the buds on that earlier trip; had seen the revolting beauty of them—the fleshy lips that opened above a pool of death into which those reaching arms would drop any living thing they touched. They kept well out of reach when a splash of crimson against the white trees flashed its warning.

Again they would traverse an open space, where outcropping rocks would send Kreiss into transports of delight over their rich mineral contents. But always their leader's eyes were turned toward a range of hills.

"It is beyond there," he assured them, "if only we can reach it." Harkness pointed to a scar on a mountainside where a crystal outcrop in a sheer face of rock sparkled brilliantly in the sunlight. "I remember that—it isn't so very far—and we can look back down the valley from there and see our ship."

"But we'll never make it tonight," said Chet; "it's a case of making camp again."

They had gained an altitude of perhaps a thousand feet. No longer did the jungle press so hard upon them. Even the single file that had been their manner of marching could be abandoned, and Harkness drew Diane to his side that he might lend her some of his own strength.

Again the soft contours of the rolling ground had been disturbed: a landslide in some other century had sent a torrent of boulders from the high slopes above. Harkness threaded his way among great masses of granite to come at last to an opening where massive monoliths formed a gateway.

IT was an entrance to another valley. They did not need to enter, for they could skirt it and continue toward the high pass in the hills. But the gateway seemed inviting. Harkness took Diane's hand to help her toward it; the others followed.

The fast sinking sun had buried itself behind a distant range, and

long shadows swept swiftly across the world, as if the oncoming night were alive—as if it were rousing from the somnolence of its daytime sleep and reaching out with black and clutching hands toward a fearful, waiting world.

"No twilight here," Chet observed; "let's find a hide-out—a cave, by choice—where we can guard the entrance and—"

A gasp from Diane checked him. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "It is not real! *C'est impossible!*"

Chet had been busied with the matter of a secure footing; he looked up now and took a step forward where Harkness and Diane stood motionless in a gateway of stone. And he, too, stopped as if stunned by the weird beauty of the scene.

A valley. Its length reached out before them to end some half mile away. Sides that might once have sloped evenly seemed weathered to a series of great steps, and an alternation of striations in black and white made a banding that encircled the entire oval. Each step was dead-black stone, each riser was snow-white marble; and the steps mounted up and up until they resembled the sides of a great bowl. In the center, like an altar for the worship of some wild, gargantuan god, was a stepped pyramid of the same startling black and white. Banded like the walls, it rose to half their height to finish in a capstone cut square and true.

An altar, perhaps; an arena, beyond a doubt, or so it seemed to Chet. He was first to put the impression in words.

"A stadium!" he marvelled; "an arena for the games of the gods!"

"The gods." Diane breathed softly, "of a wild, lost world—" But Chet held to another thought.

"Who—who built it?" he asked. "It's tremendous! There is nothing like it on Earth!"

ONLY Kreiss seemed oblivious to the weird beauty of the spectacle. To Professor Kreiss dolomite and black flint rock were dolomite and black flint; interesting specimens—a peculiar arrangement—but nature must be permitted her little vagaries.

"Who built it?" He repeated Chet's question and gave a short laugh before answering in words. "The rains, Herr Bullard, and the winds of ages past. Yes, yes! A most remarkable example of erosion—most remarkable! I must return this way some time and give it my serious attention."

Harkness had not spoken; he was shaking his head doubtfully at Kreiss' words. "I am inclined to agree with Chet," he said slowly. "But who could have built a gigantic work like this? Have there been former civilizations here?"

He straightened up and shook himself free from the effects of the wild, barbaric scene.

"And you needn't come back," he told Kreiss; "you can have a look now, to-night, by moonlight. We can't go on. I think we'll be safest on that big altar rock; nothing will get near us without our knowing."

Chet felt Diane Delacouer's hand on his arm; her other hand was gripping at Harkness. The shiver that passed through her was plainly perceptible. "I'm afraid," she confessed in a half-whisper; "there's something about it: I do not like it. There is evil there—danger. We should not enter."

Walt Harkness gently patted the hand that trembled on his arm. "I don't wonder that you are all shot to pieces," he assured her. "After last night, you've a right to be. But I really believe this is the safest spot we can find."

HE stepped forward beyond the great stones that were like a gateway from one wildly impossible

world to another. A rock slide, it seemed, had smoothed off the great steps from where they stood, for there was a descending slope that gave easy footing. He took one step, and then another, to show the girl how foolish were her fears; then he started back. In the fading light something had flashed from the jungle they had left. Across the rocky expanse it came, to bury itself in the loose soil and rubble, not two paces in advance of the startled man. An arrow!—and it stood quivering in silent warning on the path ahead.

Chet quietly unslung his bow where he had looped it over one shoulder, but Harkness motioned him back. The pistol was in his hand, but after a moment's hesitation he returned that to his belt. His voice was low and tense.

"Listen," he said: "we're no match for them with our bows. They are hidden; they could pick us off as we came. And I can't waste a single detonite shell on them while they keep out of sight. We can't go back; we must go ahead. We will all make a break for it and run as fast as we can toward the big altar—the pyramid. From there we can stand them off for a while. And we will go now and take them by surprise."

He seized Diane firmly by one arm and steadied her as they dashed down the slope. Chet and the professor were close behind. Each spine must have tingled in anticipation of a shower of arrows. Chet threw one hasty look toward the rear; the air was clear; no slender shafts pursued them. But, from the cover of the jungle growth, came a peculiar sound, almost like a human in distress—a call like a moaning cry.

THEY slackened their breath-taking pace and approached the great pyramid more slowly. As they drew near, the great steps took on their real size; each block was taller even that Chet, and he had to reach above his head to touch the edge of the stone.

They walked quickly about; found a place where the great blocks were broken down, where the slope was littered with debris from the disintegrating stone that had sifted down from above. They could climb here; it was almost like a crudely formed set of more normally sized steps. They made their way upward while Chet counted the courses of stone. Six, then eight—ten—and here Harkness called a halt.

"This—will do," he gasped between labored breaths. "Safe enough here. Chet, you and Kreiss—spread out—watch from all—sides."

The pilot was not as badly winded as Harkness who had been helping Diane. "Stay here," he told Harkness; "you, too, Kreiss; make yourselves comfortable. I will go on up to the top. The moon—or the Earth, rather—will be up pretty soon; I can keep watch in all directions from up there. We've got to get some sleep; can't let whoever it is that is trailing us rob us of our rest or we'll soon be no good. I'll call you after a while."

THE great capstone projected beyond the blocks that supported it; that much had been apparent from the ground. But Chet was amazed at the size of the monolith when he stood at last on the broad step over which this capstone projected like a roof.

The shadows were deep beneath, and Chet, knowing that he could never draw himself to the top of the great slab whose under side he could barely touch, knew also that he must watch from all sides. The shadowed floor beneath the big stone made a shelter from any watchful eyes out there in the night; here would be his beat as

sentry. He walked slowly to the side of the pyramid, then around toward the front.

It was the front to Chet because it faced the entrance, the rocky gateway, where they had come in. He did not expect to find that side in any way differing from the first. Each side was twenty paces in length. Chet measured them carefully, astounded still at the size of the structure.

"Carved by the winds and rains," he said, repeating the opinion of Professor Kreiss. "Now, I wonder. . . . It seems too regular, too much as if—" He paused in his thoughts as he reached the corner; waited to stare watchfully out into the night, turned the corner, and, still in shadow, moved on. "Too much as if nature had had some help!"

His meditation ended as abruptly as did his steady pacing: he was checked in midstride, one foot outstretched, while he struggled for balance and fought to keep from taking that forward step.

In the shelter of the capstone was a darker shadow; there was a blackness there that could mean only the opening of a cave—a cavern, whose regular outlines and square-cut portal dismissed for all time the thought of a natural opening in the rock. But it was not this alone that had brought the man up short in his stealthy stride: it had jolted him as if he had walked head on into the great monolith itself. It was not this but a flat platform before the cave, a raised stone surface some two feet above the floor. And on it, pale and unreal in the first light of the rising Earth was a naked, human form—a face that grimaced with distorted features.

CHET had known the ape-men on that earlier visit; he knew that while most of them were heavily covered with hair there were some who were almost human in their hairlessness. The body before him was one of these.

It lay limply across the stone platform, the listless head hanging downward over one edge. It had high cheekbones, a retreating forehead, glassy, staring eyes, and grinning teeth that projected from between loose lips. And the evening wind stirred the black, stringy hair while it touched lightly upon the ends of a short length of vine about the ape-man's neck, where only the ends could be seen, for the rest of the pliant vine was sunk deeply into the flesh of the neck. It had been the instrument of death; the ape-man had been strangled.

Chet tore his fascinated eyes from the revolting features of that purple face; he forced himself to look beyond at what else might be on this sacrificial stone. And, as he saw the assortment of fruit that was there on a green mat of leaves, the surprise was even greater than would have followed a repetition of the first discovery.

A naked, murdered man!—and ripe fruit! What was the meaning of this? Chet asked himself a score of questions and found the answer to none. But one thing he knew now beyond a doubt: Herr Professor Kreiss had been wrong. This was truly an altar for the performance of unknown and savage rites, and the altar itself and the whole encircling arena had been created by some intelligence. People—things—embodied intelligences of some sort had carved these stones. Chet was oppressed by a feeling of impending danger.

His thoughts came back sharply to the things on the stone: the absurdly contrasting exhibits: a naked body and fruit! But were they so different? he asked himself, and knew in the same instant that they were not. They were one and the same; they differed only in kind. They were both food!

FROM the darkness beyond came a shuffling of feet. From the black passage someone was coming—drawing near to the portal—and coming slowly, steadily through the dark. The pad of animal feet would have been unnerving—or the stealthy footfalls of an approaching savage—but this was neither; it was a scuffing, shuffling sound. The sweat stood out in beads on Chet's forehead and a trickle of it reached his eyes. He dashed it away with the back of his hand while he drew silently into the shadow of the overhanging stone. He held his breath as he watched in the darkness.

His pistol came noiselessly from his belt. Yet, how could he fire it? he asked himself in a moment of frantic planning. Only seven cartridges left!—they would need them all; and to fire now would bring more enemies upon them. He returned the gun to his belt and stooped to weigh a fragment of stone in his hand: this must serve him as a weapon.

The dragging footsteps were near, where the passage mouth loomed black. The light of a distant Earth struck slantingly across to leave this face of the pyramid in half-darkness. From that far and peaceful world the light poured floodingly down; it shone in under the projecting capstone; it struck upon the raised altar and revealed in ghastliest detail the gruesome offering there. And surely the strangest sight of all that that Earth-light disclosed was when it shone golden upon a black and hairy body of a beast that was half man, half ape. The creature moved slowly forward, walking erect, with its furry arms stretched gropingly ahead. In the full light it went shuffling on like one who is blind or who walks in the dark, until it stopped before the altar stone and stood rigidly waiting.

WAITING for what? Chet was making demands upon his reason that was already taxed beyond its capacity. He heard nothing, and he knew with entire certainty that there was no audible call, yet he sensed the message at the instant the ape-man moved.

"Flesh!" said the message. "Bring flesh! Bring it now!"

And, with glazed, wide-open eyes which plainly saw, but could not comprehend, the ape-thing stared at the altar-stone. It bent forward, took the fresh-killed body by the throat, and slung it across one shoulder as easily as a child might handle a doll; then it turned and vanished once more into the waiting dark.

"God!" breathed Chet when the vision had passed. "God help us! What does it mean?"

He took one backward step, then another, and made his way in silence along the path he had come. He must get back to the others to tell them of what he had seen; to help them to flee from this place of horror that was more terrible for its qualities of the unknown.

HE gave his companions the story in staccato sentences. "And the ape-man was unconscious," he concluded; "he was an automaton only, directed by another brain. I know it. I got that message. I tell you; it was radioed by someone or by something—sent direct to that big ape's brain.

"Now let's get out of here. Diane had it right when she said that the place was evil. But she didn't make it strong enough. It's foul with evil! It's damned! Come on, I'm leaving now!"

Chet's whispered words were uttered with all the emphasis that horror could instill. He knew that he spoke truth. But he could not know how mistaken was his last positive assertion.

"I'm leaving now!" Chet had said, and how desperately he wanted to put this place behind him only he himself could know. He took one step toward the place where they could descend; then Harkness' hand pulled him roughly to his knees.

"Down!" Harkness was commanding; "get down, Chet! They're coming—a swarm of them—through the gate!"

The pilot heard them before he saw them. They began a chant as they poured through the entrance, a weird, wailing note like the cry of a stricken animal that cries on and on. Then he saw the swarm.

They came in a cataract of black bodies that spilled through that stone portal and down the long slope. They formed a ragged column on the ground and came on toward the pyramid, where, unseen, three men and a girl from another world were crouching.

"Back!" Chet ordered in a whisper. "Keep low—in the shadow! Get around in back of the pyramid. We can make a run for it!"

THEY crept swiftly along the rocky step where the deep angle was in shadow. They reached the rear slope where Chet had climbed. And each one knew without the speaking of a word that retreat was not to be considered. The open arena!—the high bank of great steps in their bold markings of black and white! They could never hope to scale them; they would never even reach them alive, for the savage horde would overwhelm them before they had crossed the Earth-lit ground.

"All right," said Chet in acceptance of their unspoken thoughts, "up it is! Here's a hand, Diane—up you go! Now watch your step, and climb as if a thousand devils were after you, for there's all of that!"

The wave of bodies was washing against the pyramid's base when Chet drew Kreiss, the last of the four, into the shadow of the huge capstone. The noise of their climbing had been covered by the wailing cry that came piercing shrilly from the throng far below. And they had been unseen, Chet was sure; unless the one furtive shadow that he had seen draw away from the crowd and slip around toward the rear of the pyramid meant that some one of the tribe had found their trail.

From the front of the shadowed top came the shuffling of heavy, dragging feet on the stone. It was the same as before. Chet had held some vague idea of fighting off the horde from the top of the steps, for here was the only place where they could ascend. He had forgotten this other one for the moment, and he realized in a single flashing instant that here was a worse menace than the pack.

Only one, it was true, one ape-man who would be no match for them! But Chet remembered those blind, staring eyes and the message that had come to him. Those eyes had seen the horrible food upon the altar; some other brain had seen it too. The ape-man was an instrument only; there was some hidden horror in back of him, something that saw with his eyes, something that must never see them, cowering and huddled in the shadow of that great stone.

THE shuffling was coming from the right; Chet clutched silently at the others to draw them away and toward the left. They retreated to the corner, turned it, and went on toward the front; then stopped in silent waiting where the shadow ended. The front, where the altar stood, was in the full glare of Earth.

For the moment they were safe.

but what of the time when the ape-man returned? He had descended to the ground; when he climbed back again would he retrace his steps? Or would he come this side and trap them here where the light of their own Earth made any forward step impossible?

Below them the wailing ceased. Chet leaned forward to see the black horde, silent and motionless. Approaching them was the "big ape" he had seen at the altar. His hands were reaching blindly before him and he moved as would a human when entranced.

He reached the huddled blacks; his groping hands hovered hesitantly above a cowering, hairy form. Presently the ape-man passed on to the next, and his hands rested on the creature's face. From the massed figures there rose a moan, and Chet felt poignantly the animal misery of it. Suddenly all emotion was transformed to startled attention. From the slope at the rear had come the rattle of loose stones!

Far below, in plain view, was the one who had descended—Chet knew that his eyes could never mistake that blind, groping figure—but from the slope they could not see, from around the far edge of the pyramid, a clicking stone sent a repeated warning.

Chet laid a hand on Harkness' arm. "Get set, Walt!" he warned. "Get ready for trouble. There's something coming: it may come this way!"

CHAPTER XII

In the Shadow of the Pyramid

THEY waited, unbreathing, listening to the occasional stealthy sounds. The pistol was still in Chet's belt; the three men were crouched before Diane, in their hands the crude weapons that they had made.

And then the sounds ceased. The menace seemed to have passed, or to be withheld; the men had been tensely prepared for some minutes when Diane spoke softly.

"Look below," she whispered; "the savages! That big one seems to be choosing them—selecting some from among them."

Chet forced himself to look away from that corner of the rocky step where he had been expecting an unknown enemy to appear, and he stared below them where the Earth-light from the fully risen globe swept across the arena.

He was amazed at the numbers of the savages that the full light disclosed. There were hundreds—yes, thousands—of them, he estimated. And they were standing in black, clotted masses, standing awed and silent in a world that was all black and white in a dazzling contrast, while there passed among them one with outstretched arms.

The black, hairy hands would hover over a cowering head; the eyes, Chet knew, were staring widely, blindly, at the shivering creature before him. And if Chet's surmise was correct, there was another—a hidden, mysterious something—who was taking the message of those eyes as the ape-man's brain transmitted it; taking it and sending back instructions as to which victims should be selected.

Often the hands passed on; but soon they would descend to touch the savage face of another in the assemblage. At the touch the selected one jerked sharply erect, then walked stiffly from the ranks to join a group that was waiting.

At last there were nearly a hundred savage figures in that group, all grown men, young and in the full flood of their savage strength. No women were chosen, nor children, though there were countless little black bodies huddled with the others.

A PROLIFIC race, indeed, Chet thought, and this human automaton down there was leaving the women to produce more victims; leaving the children till they were fully grown, taking only the best and strongest of the pack—for what?

His question was answered in part in the next instant. While the wailing cry quivered again upon the air, the chosen hundred took up their somnambulistic walk. The messenger from the pyramid came after like a herdsman driving cattle to the slaughter. They passed from Chet's view as they rounded the rear of the pyramid, and then he heard the scuff and clatter of their ascent.

No need to explain to the others; each of the four saw all too clearly their predicament. From the rear, coming steadily on, was the savage throng; before them, plainly visible from below, was the lighted edge where the altar rock stood. To step out there in full view would bring the whole pack upon them; to drop down to another level would expose them as plainly. Only in the dark shelter of the projecting capstone were they hidden from the upturned faces now massed solidly about.

Their problem was solved for them by the sight of a savage body, black, ragged with unkempt tufts of hair—another!—a score of them! They were rounding the corner of the pyramid and walking stiffly toward them, pressing upon them.

And the arrow on the drawn bow in Chet's hand was never loosed, for each savage face was wide-eyed and devoid of expression; the ape-men neither saw nor felt them. They were hypnotized, as Chet was suddenly aware; they knew only that they must follow the mental instructions that were guiding them on.

The black, animal bodies were upon them. Chet came from the stupefying wonder that had claimed them all and sprang to shield the group from the steady advance. Harkness was beside him, and an instant later, Kreiss; Diane was at their backs. And the weight of the advancing bodies swept them irresistibly backward, out into the light, along the wide step toward the passage that yawned darkly under the projecting cap.

THERE was no checking the avalanche of bodies—no resisting them: the men were carried along; it was all they could do to keep their footing. Harkness sprang backward to take Diane in his arms and retreat with her before the advancing horde. Chet was waiting for an outcry from below, for some indication that despite the mass of bodies that smothered them, their presence had been observed. But only the wailing cry persisted.

There was another advancing column that had circled the other side, and now both groups were meeting at the passageway. Chet gripped at the figure of Kreiss who was being swept helpless toward the dark vault and he dragged him back. The two fought their way out toward the front and saw Harkness doing the same.

"The altar," gasped Chet; "up on the altar!" And he saw Harkness swing Diane up on the stone, then turn and extend a helping hand toward the two men.

Safe in the sanctuary of this altar dedicated to some deity that they could never imagine, they crouched close to its blood-clotted surface, and still there was no change in the cry from below.

"Let them all go in," Harkness whispered. "Then follow them into the shadow. There will no more come up here, I imagine. We will make our escape after a bit."

The black mouth of the passage

had swallowed the ape-men by solid scores, and now only some stragglers were left. Harkness was speaking in quick, whispered orders:

"Follow the last ones. Keep stooped over so they won't spot us from below. Wait in the darkness of the entrance."

Chet saw him crouch low as he crept from the stone. Diane followed, then Kreiss; and Chet next, close behind a shambling ape-figure that slunk into the darkness of the passageway.

THAT it was a passage Chet had not the least doubt. It had taken in these scores of savage figures, taken them somewhere; but where it led or why these poor stunned creatures had been chosen he could not know. Yet he remembered the one message he had caught: "Flesh! Bring flesh!" It had meant only one thing: it was food that was wanted—human food! And the fetid stench that was wafted from the darkness of this place of mystery and horror, that made him reel back and put a hand to his revolted lips, would not have encouraged him, even had he had any desire to learn the answer to the puzzle.

Diane was half-crouching; she was choking with the foul air. Harkness spoke gaspingly as he took her by the arm:

"Outside, for God's sake! . . . Horrible! . . . Get Diane outside —try lying down—we may be out of sight!"

But this time he did not follow his own instructions. He rose erect, instead, and stood swaying as if dazed; and Chet saw that before him, outlined against the lighted opening in the rock, was the messenger he had seen.

Black against the bright Earthlight, his features were lost; no expression could be seen. But his eyes, that were dead and white like the upturned belly of a fish, came suddenly to life. They glared from the dark face with a light that came almost visibly from them to the staring eyes of Walt Harkness. Chet saw Harkness stiffen, one upraised hand falling woodenly to his side; a cry of warning was strangled in his throat, and then the glaring eyes passed on to the face of Diane.

Chet had forgotten this messenger from the pyramid's hidden horror. If he had thought of him at all he had assumed that he had passed in with the other crowding ape-men; he was one like them, undistinguishable from the rest. And now the savage figure was before them in terrifying reality.

THE eyes passed on to Kreiss. Then the ugly face swung toward Chet, and, as their eyes met, it seemed to Chet that a blow had crashed stunningly upon his brain. He tried to move—he knew that he *must* move. He must reach for his bow, must leap upon this hulking brute and beat at the glaring eyes with his bare fists. And his muscles that he tried to rouse to action might have changed to stone, so unresponsive were they, and unmoving.

The hairy hands reached out and touched Harkness. They passed on and lingered upon the blanched features of the girl, and Chet raged inwardly at his inability to resist and her utter helplessness to draw away. Then Kreiss; and again Chet's turn. And, with the touching of those rough animal hands, he felt that a contact had been established with some distant force —a something that communicated with him, that sent thoughts which his brain phrased in words.

"Curious!" said those thoughts. "How exceedingly curious! We shall be interested in learning more. We shall learn all we can in one way

and another of this new race. We shall dismember them slowly, all but the woman: we find her strangely attractive. . . . You will bring them to us at once."

And Chet knew that the instructions were for the messenger whose hands came stiffly upward to point the way; while, with a portion of his mind that was functioning freely, Chet raged as he saw Diane take the first stiff, involuntary step forward. Then Harkness and Kreiss! and he knew that he too must follow, knew himself to be as helpless as the driven brutes he had seen herded down below. And then, with that same mind that was still able to comprehend the messages of his own eyes and ears, he knew that from behind the savage figure there had come a sound.

HIS senses were alert, sharpened to an abnormal degree; the almost silent footfall otherwise could never have been heard.

The raised hand swung toward him; he knew that he must turn and follow the others to whatever awaited. . . . But the hand paused! Then swiftly the savage figure swung to face toward the entrance, and those blazing eyes, as Chet knew, were a match for any opponent.

But the eyes never found what they looked for and the quick swing of the big ape-body was never completed. In the portal of light there was framed a naked figure which sprang as if from nowhere, squat, savage and ape-like, but hairless. Its arms were upraised; the hands held a bow; and the twang of the bow-string came as one with the ripping thud of a shaft that was tearing through flesh.

The savage fell in mid-turn; and it seemed as if the blazing light of the terrible eyes must have flicked out before the breath of Death. And, protruding from the thick neck, was the shaft of a crude arrow. . . . There were others that flashed, thudding and quivering, into the body that jerked with each impact, then lay still, a darker blot on the floor of a dark cave.

Chet was breathless; it was an instant before he realized that he was free, that the hypnotic bonds that had bound him were loosed. It was another instant before he sensed that his companions were still marching—trudging stiffly, woodenly off through the dark. He bounded after, heedless of bruising walls; he followed where the sound of their scuffling feet marked their progress to a sure doom.

There were stairs; how he sensed them Chet could not have told. But he paused, hesitated a moment, then found the first step and half ran, half fell, through the utter darkness of the pit into which they had gone.

THE odors that had seemed the utmost of vileness now came to him a hundred times worse. They tore at his throat with a strangling grip, and he was weak with nausea when he crashed upon a figure that he knew was Kreiss. Then on, to grasp at Diane and Harkness; to drag them to a standstill in the darkness that pressed upon them smotheringly, while he shook them, beat at them, shouted their names.

"Diane! Walt! Wake up! Wake up, I tell you! We're going back!"

He swung them around; forced them to face about.

"Walt, for God's sake, wake up! Diane! Kreiss!" The deep, sobbing breath of Diane was the first encouraging response.

Then: "Free!" she gasped. "I'm free!" And Harkness and Kreiss both mumbled incoherently as they came from their hypnotic stupor.

"How—" began Harkness, "how did you—" But Chet waited for no

explanation of the seeming miracle that had just taken place.

"Go back," he told them, "—back up the steps!" And a babel of cries that were terrifying in their inhuman savagery welled up from the depths of the pyramid to urge them on.

The body of their captor was prone on the floor above. they stepped over it to reach the entrance. No figure showed there now; Chet stooped low and stepped forth cautiously that the surging horde on the ground might not see him. The others followed. He felt Harkness' hand in a sudden warning grip upon him.

"Chet!" said Harkness, "there is something there in the shadow—there!" And Chet saw, even before Walt pointed, a wriggling figure that crept toward them.

He struck down the bow that Kreiss had raised, and a ray of light came through a jagged niche in the rock above to fall upon the face of the one who drew near.

Abjectly, in utmost humility, the naked figure crept toward their feet, and the savage face that was raised to theirs was wreathed in a distorted smile.

Beside him, Chet felt Harkness struggling to speak. In wondering tones that were almost unbelieving, Harkness choked out one word.

"Towahg!" he said. "Towahg!"

And the thick lips in that upraised face echoed proudly:

"Towahg! Me come!"

(To be continued.)

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The men formed along the wreck pack's edge

The Sargasso of Space

By Edmond Hamilton

CAPTAIN CRAIN faced his crew calmly. "We may as well face the facts, men," he said. "The ship's fuel-tanks are empty, and we are drifting through space toward the dead-area."

The twenty-odd officers and men gathered on the middle-deck of the freighter *Pallas* made no answer, and Crain continued:

"We left Jupiter with full tanks, more than enough fuel to take us to Neptune. But the leaks in the star-

Helpless, doomed, into the graveyard of space floats the wrecked freighter *Pallas*

board tanks lost us half our supply, and we had used the other half before discovering that. Since the ship's rocket-tubes cannot operate without fuel, we are simply drifting. We would drift on to Neptune if the attraction of Uranus were not pulling us to the right. That attraction alters our course so that in three ship-days we shall drift into the dead-area."

Rance Kent, first-officer of the *Pallas*, asked a question: "Couldn't we, raise Neptune with the radio, sir, and have them send out a fuel-ship in time to reach us?"

"It's impossible, Mr. Kent," Crain answered. "Our main radio is dead without fuel to run its dynamotors, and our auxiliary set hasn't the power to reach Neptune."

"Why not abandon ship in the space-suits," asked Liggett, the second-officer, "and trust to the chance of some ship picking us up?"

The captain shook his head. "It would be quite useless, for we'd simply drift on through space with the ship into the dead-area."

The score of members of the crew, bronzed space-sailors out of every port in the solar system, had listened mutely. Now, one of them, a tall tube-man, stepped forward a little.

"Just what is this dead-area, sir?" he asked. "I've heard of it, but as this is my first outer-planet voyage, I know nothing about it."

"I'll admit I know little more," said Liggett, "save that a good many disabled ships have drifted into it and have never come out."

"THE dead-area," Crain told them, "is a region of space ninety thousand miles across within Neptune's orbit, in which the ordinary gravitational attractions of the solar system are dead. This is because in that region the pulls of the sun and the outer planets exactly balance each other. Because of that, anything in the dead-area will stay in there until time ends, unless it has power of its own. Many wrecked space-ships have drifted into it at one time or another, none ever emerging; and it's believed that there is a great mass of wrecks somewhere in the area, drawn and held together by mutual attraction."

"And we're drifting in to join them," Kent said. "Some prospect!"

"Then there's really no chance for us?" asked Liggett keenly.

Captain Crain thought. "As I see it, very little," he admitted. "If our auxiliary radio can reach some nearby ship before the *Pallas* enters the dead-area, we'll have a chance. But it seems a remote one."

He addressed himself to the men: "I have laid the situation frankly before you because I consider you entitled to the truth. You must remember, however, that while there is life there is hope.

"There will be no change in ship routine, and the customary watches will be kept. Half-rations of food and water will be the rule from now on, though. That is all."

As the men moved silently off, the captain looked after them with something of pride.

"They're taking it like men," he told Kent and Liggett. "It's a pity there's no way out for them and us."

"If the *Pallas* does enter the dead-area and join the wreck-pack," Liggett said, "how long will we be able to live?"

"Probably for some months on our present condensed air and food supplies," Crain answered. "I would prefer, myself, a quicker end."

"So would I," said Kent. "Well, there's nothing left but to pray for some kind of ship to cross our path in the next day or two."

KENT'S prayers were not answered in the next ship-day, nor in the next. For, though one of

the *Pallas'* radio-operators was constantly at the instruments under Captain Crain's orders, the weak calls of the auxiliary set raised no response.

Had they been on the Venus or Mars run, Kent told himself, there would be some chance, but out here in the vast spaces, between the outer planets, ships were fewer and farther between. The big, cigar-shaped freighter drifted helplessly on in a broad curve toward the dreaded area, the green light-speck of Neptune swinging to their left.

On the third ship-day Kent and Captain Crain stood in the pilot-house behind Liggett, who sat at the now useless rocket-tube controls. Their eyes were on the big glass screen of the gravograph. The black dot on it that represented their ship was crawling steadily toward the bright red circle that stood for the dead-area. . . .

They watched silently until the dot had crawled over the circle's red line, heading toward its center.

"Well, we're in at last," Kent commented. "There seems to be no change in anything, either."

Crain pointed to the instrument-panel. "Look at the gravitometers."

Kent did. "All dead! No gravitational pull from any direction—no, that one shows a slight attraction from ahead!"

"Then gravitational attraction of some sort does exist in the dead-area after all!" Liggett exclaimed.

"You don't understand," said Crain. "That attraction from ahead is the pull of the wreck-pack at the dead-area's center."

"And it's pulling the *Pallas* toward it?" Kent exclaimed.

Crain nodded. "We'll probably reach the wreck-pack in two more ship-days."

THE next two ship-days seemed to Kent drawn out endlessly. A moody silence had grown upon the officers and men of the ship. All seemed oppressed by the strange forces of fate that had seized the ship and were carrying it, smoothly and soundlessly, into this region of irrevocable doom.

The radio-operators' vain calls had ceased. The *Pallas* drifted on into the dreaded area like some dumb ship laden with damned souls. It drifted on, Kent told himself, as many a wrecked and disabled ship had done before it, with the ordinary activities and life of the solar system forever behind it, and mystery and death ahead.

It was toward the end of the second of those two ship-days that Liggett's voice came down from the pilot-house:

"Wreck-pack in sight ahead!"

"We've arrived, anyway!" Kent cried, as he and Crain hastened up into the pilot-house. The crew was running to the deck-windows.

"Right ahead there, about fifteen degrees left," Liggett told Kent and Crain, pointing. "Do you see it?"

Kent stared; nodded. The wreck-pack was a distant, disk-like mass against the star-decked heavens, a mass that glinted here and there in the feeble sunlight of space. It did not seem large, but, as they drifted steadily closer in the next hours, they saw that in reality the wreck-pack was tremendous, measuring at least fifty miles across.

Its huge mass was a heterogeneous heap, composed mostly of countless cigar-like space-ships in all stages of wreckage. Some appeared smashed almost out of all recognizable shape, while others were, to all appearances unharmed. They floated together in this dense mass in space, crowded against one another by their mutual attraction.

There seemed to be among them every type of ship known in the solar system, from small, swift mail-boats to big freighters. And,

as they drifted nearer, the three in the pilot-house could see that around and between the ships of the wreck-pack floated much other matter—fragments of wreckage, meteors small and large, and space-debris of every sort.

The *Pallas* was drifting, not straight toward the wreck-pack, but in a course that promised to take the ship past it.

"We're not heading into the wreck-pack!" Liggett exclaimed. "Maybe we'll drift past it, and on out the dead-area's other side!"

CAPTAIN CRAIN smiled mirthlessly. "You're forgetting your space-mechanics, Liggett. We will drift along the wreck-pack's edge, and then will curve in and go round it in a closing spiral until we reach its edge."

"Lord, who'd have thought there were so many wrecks here!" Kent marvelled. "There must be thousands of them!"

"They've been collecting here ever since the first interplanetary rocket-ships went forth," Crain reminded him. "Not only meteor-wrecked ships, but ships whose mechanisms went wrong—or that ran out of fuel like ours—or that were captured and sacked, and then set adrift by space-pirates."

The *Pallas* by then was drifting along the wreck-pack's rim at a half-mile distance, and Kent's eyes were running over the mass.

"Some of those ships look entirely undamaged. Why couldn't we find one that has fuel in its tanks, transfer it to our own tanks, and get away?" he asked.

Crain's eyes lit. "Kent, that's a real chance! There must be some ships in that pack with fuel in them, and we can use the space-suits to explore for them!"

"Look, we're beginning to curve in around the pack now!" Liggett exclaimed.

The *Pallas*, as though loath to pass the wreck-pack, was curving inward to follow its rim. In the next hours it continued to sail slowly around the great pack, approaching closer and closer to its edge.

In those hours Kent and Crain and all in the ship watched with a fascinated interest that even knowledge of their own peril could not kill. They could see swift-lined passenger-ships of the Pluto and Neptune runs shouldering against small space-yachts with the insignia of Mars or Venus on their bows. Wrecked freighters from Saturn or Earth floated beside rotund grain-boats from Jupiter.

The debris among the pack's wrecks was just as varied, holding fragments of metal, dark meteors of differing size—and many human bodies. Among these were some clad in the insulated space-suits, with their transparent glass-its helmets. Kent wondered what wreck they had abandoned hastily in those suits, only to be swept with it into the dead-area, to die in their suits.

By the end of that ship-day, the *Pallas*, having floated almost completely around the wreck-pack, finally struck the wrecks at its edge with a jarring shock; then bobbed for a while and lay still. From pilot-house and deck windows the men looked eagerly forth.

THEIR ship floated at the wreck-pack's edge. Directly to its right floated a sleek, shining Uranus-Jupiter passenger-ship whose bows had been smashed in by a meteor. On their left bobbed an unmarked freighter of the old type with projecting rocket-tubes, apparently intact. Beyond them in the wreck-pack lay another Uranus craft, a freighter, and, beyond it, stretched the countless other wrecks.

Captain Crain summoned the

crew together again on the middle-deck.

"Men, we've reached the wreck-pack at the dead-area's center, and here we'll stay until the end of time unless we get out under our own power. Mr. Kent has suggested a possible way of doing so, which I consider highly feasible.

"He has suggested that in some of the ships in the wreck-pack may be found enough fuel to enable us to escape from the dead-area, once it is transferred to this ship. I am going to permit him to explore the wreck-pack with a party in space suits, and I am asking for volunteers for this service."

The entire crew stepped quickly forward. Crain smiled. "Twelve of you will be enough," he told them. "The eight tube-men and four of the cargo-men will go, therefore, with Mr. Kent and Mr. Liggett as leaders. Mr. Kent, you may address the men if you wish."

"Get down to the lower airlock and into your space-suits at once, then," Kent told them. "Mr. Liggett, will you supervise that?"

As Liggett and the men trooped down to the airlock, Kent turned back toward his superior.

"There's a very real chance of your becoming lost in this huge wreck-pack, Kent," Crain told him: "so be very careful to keep your bearings at all times. I know I can depend on you."

"I'll do my best," Kent was saying, when Liggett's excited face reappeared suddenly at the stair.

"There are men coming toward the *Pallas* along the wreck-pack's edge!" he reported—"a half-dozen men in space-suits!"

"You must be mistaken, Liggett!" exclaimed Crain. "They must be some of the bodies in space-suits we saw in the pack."

"No, they're living men!" Liggett cried. "They're coming straight toward us—come down and see!"

CRAIN and Kent followed Liggett quickly down to the airlock room, where the men who had started donning their space-suits were now peering excitedly from the windows. Crain and Kent looked where Liggett pointed, along the wreck-pack's edge to the ship's right.

Six floating shapes, men in space-suits, were approaching along the pack's border. They floated smoothly through space, reaching the wrecked passenger-ship beside the *Pallas*. They braced their feet against its side and propelled themselves on through the void like swimmers under water, toward the *Pallas*.

"They must be survivors from some wreck that drifted in here as we did!" Kent exclaimed. "Maybe they've lived here for months!"

"It's evident that they saw the *Pallas* drift into the pack, and have come to investigate," Crain estimated. "Open the airlock for them, men, for they'll want to come inside."

Two of the men spun the wheels that slid aside the airlock's outer door. In a moment the half-dozen men outside had reached the ship's side, and had pulled themselves down inside the airlock.

When all were in, the outer door was closed, and air hissed in to fill the lock. The airlock's inner door then slid open and the newcomers stepped into the ship's interior, unscrewing their transparent helmets as they did so. For a few moments the visitors silently surveyed their new surroundings.

Their leader was a swarthy individual with sardonic black eyes who, on noticing Crain's captain-insignia, came toward him with outstretched hand. His followers seemed to be cargo-men or deck-men, looking hardly intelligent enough to Kent's eyes to be tube-men.

"WELCOME to our city!" their leader exclaimed as he shook Crain's hand. "We saw your ship drift in, but hardly expected to find anyone living in it."

"I'll confess that we're surprised ourselves to find any life here," Crain told him. "You're living on one of the wrecks?"

The other nodded. "Yes, on the *Martian Queen*, a quarter-mile along the pack's edge. It was a Saturn-Neptune passenger ship, and about a month ago we were at this cursed dead-area's edge, when half our rocket-tubes exploded. Eighteen of us escaped the explosion, the ship's walls still being tight; and we drifted into the pack here, and have been living here ever since."

"My name's Krell," he added, "and I was a tube-man on the ship. I and another of the tube-men, named Jandrea, were the highest in rank left, all the officers and other tube-men having been killed, so we took charge and have been keeping order."

"What about your passengers?" Liggett asked.

"All killed but one," Krell answered. "When the tubes let go they smashed up the whole lower two decks."

Crain briefly explained to him the *Pallas'* predicament. "Mr. Kent and Mr. Liggett were on the point of starting a search of the wreck-pack for fuel when you arrived," he said, "With enough fuel we can get clear of the dead-area."

Krell's eyes lit up. "That would mean a getaway for all of us! It surely ought to be possible!"

"Do you know whether there are any ships in the pack with fuel in their tanks?" Kent asked. Krell shook his head.

"We've searched through the wreck-pack a good bit, but never bothered about fuel, it being no good to us. But there ought to be some, at least: there's enough wrecks in this cursed place to make it possible to find almost anything.

"You'd better not start exploring, though," he added, "without some of us along as guides, for I'm here to tell you that you can lose yourself in this wreck-pack without knowing it. If you wait until to-morrow, I'll come over myself and go with you."

"I think that would be wise," Crain said to Kent. "There is plenty of time."

"Time is the one thing there's plenty of in this damned place," Krell agreed. "We'll be getting back to the *Martian Queen* now and give the good news to Jandrea and the rest."

"Wouldn't mind if Liggett and I came along, would you?" Kent asked. "I'd like to see how your ship's fixed—that is, if it's all right with you, sir," he added to his superior.

Crain nodded. "All right if you don't stay long," he said. But to Kent's surprise Krell seemed reluctant to endorse his proposal.

"I guess it'll be all right," he said slowly, "though there's nothing much on the *Martian Queen* to see."

KRELL and his followers replaced their helmets and returned into the airlock. Liggett followed them, and, as Kent struggled hastily into a space-suit, he found Captain Crain at his side.

"Kent, look sharp when you get over on that ship," Crain told him. "I don't like the look of this Krell, and his story about all the officers being killed in the explosion sounds fishy to me."

"To me, too," Kent agreed. "But Liggett and I will have the suit-phones in our space-suits and can call you from there in case of need."

Crain nodded, and Kent with

space-suit on and transparent helmet screwed tight, stepped into the airlock with the rest. The airlock's inner door closed, the outer one opened, and as the air puffed out into space, Kent and Krell and Liggett leapt out into the void, the others following.

It was no novelty to Kent to float in a space-suit in the empty void. He and the others now floated as smoothly as though under water toward a wrecked liner at the *Pallas'* right. They reached it, pulled themselves around it, and, with feet braced against its side, propelled themselves on through space along the border of the wreck-pack.

They passed a half-dozen wrecks thus, before coming to the *Martian Queen*. It was a silvery, glistening ship whose stern and lower walls were bulging and strained, but not cracked. Kent told himself that Krell had spoken truth about the exploding rocket-tubes, at least.

They struck the *Martian Queen's* side and entered the upper-airlock open for them. Once through the airlock they found themselves on the ship's upper-deck. And when Kent and Liggett removed their helmets with the others they found a full dozen men confronting them, a brutal-faced group who exhibited some surprise at sight of them.

FOREMOST among them stood a tall, heavy individual who regarded Kent and Liggett with the cold, suspicious eyes of an animal.

"My comrade and fellow-ruler here, Wald Jandron," said Krell. To Jandron he explained rapidly. "The whole crew of the *Pallas* is alive, and they say if they can find fuel in the wreck-pack their ship can get out of here."

"Good," grunted Jandron. "The sooner they can do it, the better it will be for us."

Kent saw Liggett flush angrily, but he ignored Jandron and spoke to Krell. "You said one of your passengers had escaped the explosion?"

To Kent's amazement a girl stepped from behind the group of men, a slim girl with pale face and steady, dark eyes. "I'm the passenger," she told him. "My name's Marta Mallen."

Kent and Liggett stared, astounded. "Good Lord!" Kent exclaimed. "A girl like you on this ship!"

"Miss Mallen happened to be on the upper-deck at the time of the explosion and, so, escaped when the other passengers were killed," Krell explained smoothly. "Isn't that so, Miss Mallen?"

The girl's eyes had not left Kent's, but at Krell's words she nodded. "Yes, that is so," she said mechanically.

Kent collected his whirling thoughts. "But wouldn't you rather go back to the *Pallas* with us?" he asked. "I'm sure you'd be more comfortable there."

"She doesn't go," grunted Jandron. Kent turned in quick wrath toward him, but Krell intervened.

"Jandron only means that Miss Mallen is much more comfortable on this passenger-ship than she'd be in your freighter." He shot a glance at the girl as he spoke, and Kent saw her wince.

"I'm afraid that's so," she said; "but I thank you for the offer, Mr. Kent."

Kent could have sworn that there was an appeal in her eyes, and he stood for a moment, indecisive, Jandron's stare upon him. After a moment's thought he turned to Krell.

"You were going to show me the damage the exploding tubes did," he said, and Krell nodded quickly.

"Of course; you can see from the head of the stair back in the after-deck."

He led the way along a corridor,

Jandron and the girl and two of the men coming with them. Kent's thoughts were still chaotic as he walked between Krell and Liggett. What was this girl doing amid the men of the *Martian Queen?* What had her eyes tried to tell him?

Liggett nudged his side in the dim corridor, and Kent, looking down, saw dark splotches on its metal floor. Blood-stains! His suspicions strengthened. They might be from the bleeding of those wounded in the tube-explosions. But were they?

THEY reached the after-deck whose main's head gave a view of the wrecked tube-rooms beneath. The lower decks had been smashed by terrific forces. Kent's practiced eyes ran rapidly over the shattered rocket-tubes.

"They've back-blasted from being fired too fast," he said. "Who was controlling the ship when this happened?"

"Galling, our second-officer," answered Krell. "He had found us rooted too close to the dead-ether's edge and was trying to get away from it in a hurry, when he used the tubes too fast, and half of them back-blasted."

"If Galling was at the controls in the pilot-house, how did the explosion kill him?" asked Liggett skepically. Krell turned quickly.

"The shock threw him against the pilot-house wall and fractured his skull—he died in an hour," he said. Liggett was silent.

"Well, this ship will never move again," Kent said. "It's too bad that the explosion blew out your tanks, but we ought to find fuel somewhere in the wreck-pack for the *Pallas*. And now we'd best get back."

As they returned up the dim corridor Kent managed to walk beside Marta Mallen, and, without being seen, he contrived to detach his suit-phone—the compact little radiophone case inside his space-suit's neck—and slip it into the girl's grasp. He dared utter no word of explanation, but apparently she understood, for she had concealed the suit-phone by the time they reached the upper-deck.

Kent and Liggett prepared to don their space-helmets, and before entering the airlock, Kent turned to Krell.

"We'll expect you at the *Pallas* first hour to-morrow, and we'll start searching the wreck-pack with a dozen of our men," he said.

He then extended his hand to the girl. "Good-by, Miss Mallen. I hope we can have a talk soon."

He had said the words with double meaning, and saw understanding in her eyes. "I hope we can, too," she said.

Kent's nod to Jandron went unanswered, and he and Liggett adjusted their helmets and entered the airlock.

Once out of it, they kicked rapidly away from the *Martian Queen*, floating along with the wreck-pack's huge mass to their right, and only the star-flecked emptiness of infinity to their left. In a few minutes they reached the airlock of the *Pallas*.

THEY found Captain Crain awaiting them anxiously. Briefly Kent reported everything.

"I'm certain there has been foul play aboard the *Martian Queen*," he said. "Krell you saw for yourself. Jandron is pure brute, and their men seem capable of anything.

"I gave the suit-phone to the girl, however, and if she can call us with it, we can get the truth from her. She dared not tell me anything there in the presence of Krell and Jandron."

Crain nodded, his face grave. "We'll see whether or not she calls," he said.

Kent took a suit-phone from one of their space-suits and rapidly tuned it to match the one he had left with Marta Mallen. Almost at once they heard her voice from it, and Kent answered rapidly.

"I'm so glad I got you!" she exclaimed. "Mr. Kent, I dared not tell you the truth about this ship when you were here, or Krell and the rest would have killed you at once."

"I thought that was it, and that's why I left the suit-phone for you," Kent said. "Just what is the truth?"

"Krell and Jandron and these men of theirs are the ones who killed the officers and passengers of the *Martian Queen!* What they told you about the explosion was true enough, for the explosion did happen that way, and because of it, the ship drifted into the dead-area. But the only ones killed by it were some of the tube-men and three passengers.

"Then, while the ship was drifting into the dead-area, Krell told the men that the fewer aboard, the longer they could live on the ship's food and air. Krell and Jandron led the men in a surprise attack and killed all the officers and passengers, and threw their bodies out into space. I was the only passenger they spared, because both Krell and Jandron—want me!"

THERE was a silence, and Kent felt a red anger rising in him. "Have they dared harm you?" he asked after a moment.

"No, for Krell and Jandron are too jealous of each other to permit the other to touch me. But it's been terrible living with them in this awful place."

"Ask her if she knows what their plans are in regard to us," Crain told Kent.

Marta had apparently overheard the question. "I don't know that, for they shut me in my cabin as soon as you left," she said. "I've heard them talking and arguing excitedly, though. I know that if you do find fuel, they'll try to kill you all and escape from here in your ship."

"Pleasant prospect," Kent commented. "Do you think they plan an attack on us now?"

"No; I think that they'll wait until you've refueled your ship, if you are able to do that, and then try treachery."

"Well, they'll find us ready. Miss Mallen, you have the suit-phone: keep it hidden in your cabin and I'll call you first thing to-morrow. We're going to get you out of there, but we don't want to break with Krell until we're ready. Will you be all right until then?"

"Of course I will," she answered. "There's another thing, though. My name isn't Miss Mallen—it's Marta."

"Mine's Rance," said Kent, smiling. "Good-by until to-morrow, then, Marta."

"Good-by, Rance."

Kent rose from the instrument with the smile still in his eyes, but with his lips compressed. "Damn it, there's the bravest and finest girl in the solar system!" he exclaimed. "Over there with those brutes!"

"We'll have her out, never fear," Crain reassured him. "The main thing is to determine our course toward Krell and Jandron."

Kent thought. "As I see it, Krell can help us immeasurably in our search through the wreck-pack for fuel," he said. "I think it would be best to keep on good terms with him until we've found fuel and have it in our tanks. Then we can turn the tables on them before they can do anything."

Crain nodded thoughtfully. "I think you're right. Then you and Liggett and Krell can head our search-party to-morrow."

Crain established watches on a new schedule, and Kent and Liggett and the dozen men chosen for the exploring party of the next day ate a scanty meal and turned in for some sleep.

WHEN Kent woke and glimpsed the massed wrecks through the window he was for the moment amazed, but rapidly remembered. He and Liggett were finishing their morning ration when Crain pointed to a window.

"There comes Krell now," he said, indicating the single space-suited figure approaching along the wreck-pack's edge.

"I'll call Marta before he gets here," said Kent hastily.

The girl answered on the suit-phone immediately, and it occurred to Kent that she must have spent the night without sleeping. "Krell left a few minutes ago," she said.

"Yes, he's coming now. You heard nothing of their plans?"

"No; they've kept me shut in my cabin. However, I did hear Krell giving Jandron and the rest directions. I'm sure they're plotting something."

"We're prepared for them," Kent assured her. "If all goes well, before you realize it, you'll be sailing out of here with us in the *Pallas*."

"I hope so," she said. "Rance, be careful with Krell in the wreck-pack. He's dangerous."

"I'll be watching him," he promised. "Good-by, Marta."

Kent reached the lower-deck just as Krell entered from the airlock, his swarthy face smiling as he removed his helmet. He carried a pointed steel bar. Liggett and the others were donning their suits.

"All ready to go, Kent?" Krell asked.

Kent nodded. "All ready," he said shortly. Since hearing Marta's story he found it hard to dissimulate with Krell.

"You'll want bars like mine," Krell continued, "for they're damned handy when you get jammed between wreckage masses. Exploring this wreck-pack is no soft job: I can tell you from experience."

Liggett and the rest had their suits adjusted, and, with bars in their grasp, followed Krell into the airlock. Kent hung back for a last word with Crain, who, with his half-dozen remaining men, was watching.

"Marta just told me that Krell and Jandron have been plotting something," he told the captain; "so I'd keep a close watch outside."

"Don't worry, Kent. We'll let no one inside the *Pallas* until you and Liggett and the men get back."

IN a few minutes they were out of the ship, with Krell and Kent and Liggett leading, and the twelve members of the *Pallas'* crew following closely.

The three leaders climbed up on the Uranus-Jupiter passenger-ship that lay beside the *Pallas*, the others moving on and exploring the neighboring wrecks in parties of two and three. From the top of the passenger-ship, when they gained it, Kent and his two companions could look far out over the wreck-pack. It was an extraordinary spectacle, this stupendous mass of dead ships floating motionless in the depths of space, with the burning stars above and below them.

His companions and the other men clambering over the neighboring wrecks seemed weird figures in their bulky suits and transparent helmets. Kent looked back at the *Pallas*, and then along the wreck-pack's edge to where he could glimpse the silvery side of the *Martian Queen*. But now Krell and Liggett were descending into the ship's interior through the great opening smashed in its bows, and Kent followed.

They found themselves in the

liner's upper navigation-rooms. Officers and men lay about, frozen to death at the instant the meteor-struck vessel's air had rushed out, and the cold of space had entered. Krell led the way on, down into the ship's lower decks, where they found the bodies of the crew and passengers lying in the same silent death.

The salons held beautifully-dressed women, distinguished-looking men, lying about as the meteor's shock had hurled them. One group lay around a card-table, their game interrupted. A woman still held a small child, both seemingly asleep. Kent tried to shake off the oppression he felt as he and Krell and Liggett continued down to the tank-rooms.

They found their quest there useless, for the tanks had been strained by the meteor's shock, and were empty. Kent felt Liggett grasp his hand and heard him speak, the sound-vibrations coming through their contacting suits.

"Nothing here; and we'll find it much the same through all these wrecks, if I'm not wrong. Tanks always give at a shock."

"There must be some ships with fuel still in them among all these," Kent answered.

THEY climbed back, up to the ship's top, and leapt off it toward a Jupiter freighter lying a little farther inside the pack. As they floated toward it, Kent saw their men moving on with them from ship to ship, progressing inward into the pack. Both Kent and Liggett kept Krell always ahead of them, knowing that a blow from his bar, shattering their glassite helmets, meant instant death. But Krell seemed quite intent on the search for fuel.

The big Jupiter freighter seemed intact from above, but, when they penetrated into it, they found its whole under-side blown away, apparently by an explosion of its tanks. They moved on to the next ship, a private space-yacht, small in size, but luxurious in fittings. It had been abandoned in space, its rocket-tubes burst and tanks strained.

They went on, working deeper into the wreck-pack. Kent almost forgot the paramount importance of their search in the fascination of it. They explored almost every known type of ship—freighters, liners, cold-storage boats, and grain-boats. Once Kent's hopes ran high at sight of a fuel-ship, but it proved to be in ballast, its cargo-tanks empty and its own tanks and tubes apparently blown simultaneously.

Kent's muscles ached from the arduous work of climbing over and exploring the wrecks. He and Liggett had become accustomed to the sight of frozen, motionless bodies.

As they worked deeper into the pack, they noticed that the ships were of increasingly older types, and at last Krell signalled a halt. "We're almost a mile in," he told them, gripping their hands. "We'd better work back out, taking a different section of the pack as we do."

Kent nodded. "It may change our luck," he said.

It did; for when they had gone not more than a half-mile back, they glimpsed one of their men waving excitedly from the top of a Pluto liner.

They hastened at once toward him, the other men gathering also; and when Kent grasped the man's hand he heard his excited voice.

"Fuel-tanks here are more than half-full, sir!"

THEY descended quickly into the liner, finding that though its whole stern had been sheared away by a meteor, its tanks had remained miraculously unstrained.

"Enough fuel here to take the *Pallas* to Neptune!" Kent exclaimed.

"How will you get it over to your ship?" Krell asked. Kent pointed to great reels of flexible metal tubing hanging near the tanks.

"We'll pump it over. The *Pallas* has tubing like this ship's, for taking on fuel in space, and, by joining its tubing to this, we'll have a tube-line between the two ships. It's hardly more than a quarter-mile."

"Let's get back and let them know about it," Liggett urged, and they climbed back out of the liner.

They worked their way out of the wreck-pack with much greater speed than that with which they had entered, needing only an occasional brace against a ship's side to send them floating over the wrecks. They came to the wreck-pack's edge at a little distance from the *Pallas*, and hastened toward it.

They found the outer door of the *Pallas'* airlock open, and entered, Krell remaining with them. As the outer door closed and air hissed into the lock, Kent and the rest removed their helmets. The inner door slid open as they were doing this, and from inside almost a score of men leapt upon them!

Kent, stunned for a moment, saw Jandron among their attackers, bellowing orders to them, and even as he struck out furiously he comprehended. Jandron and the men of the *Martian Queen* had somehow captured the *Pallas* from Crain and had been awaiting their return!

THE struggle was almost instantly over, for, outnumbered and hampered as they were by their heavy space-suits, Kent and Liggett and their followers had no chance. Their hands, still in the suits, were bound quickly behind them at Jandron's orders.

Kent heard an exclamation, and saw Marta starting toward him from behind Jandron's men. But a sweep of Jandron's arm brushed her rudely back. Kent strained madly at his bonds. Krell's face had a triumphant look.

"Did it all work as I told you it would, Jandron?" he asked.

"It worked," Jandron answered impassively. "When they saw fifteen of us coming from the wreck-pack in space-suits, they opened right up to us."

Kent understood, and cursed Krell's cunning. Crain, seeing the fifteen figures approaching from the wreck-pack, had naturally thought they were Kent's party, and had let them enter to overwhelm his half-dozen men.

"We put Crain and his men over in the *Martian Queen*," Jandron continued, "and took all their helmets so they can't escape. The girl we brought over here. Did you find a wreck with fuel?"

Krell nodded. "A Pluto liner a quarter-mile back, and we can pump the fuel over here by connecting tube-lines. What the devil—"

Jandron had made a signal at which three of his men had leapt forward on Krell, securing his hands like those of the others.

"Have you gone crazy, Jandron?" cried Krell, his face red with anger and surprise.

"No," Jandron replied impassively; "but the men are as tired as I am of your bossing ways, and have chosen me as their sole leader."

"You dirty double-crosser!" Krell raged. "Are you men going to let him get away with this?"

The men paid no attention, and Jandron motioned to the airlock. "Take them over to the *Martian Queen* too," he ordered, "and make sure there's no space-helmet left there. Then get back at once, for we've got to get the fuel into this ship and make a getaway."

THE helmets of Kent and Krell and the other helpless prisoners were put upon them, and, with hands still bound, they were herded into the airlock by eight of Jandron's men attired in space-suits also. The prisoners were then joined one to another by a strand of metal cable.

Kent, glancing back into the ship as the airlock's inner door closed, saw Jandron giving rapid orders to his followers, and noticed Marta held back from the airlock by one of them. Krell's eyes glittered venomously through his helmet. The outer door opened, and their guards jerked them forth into space by the connecting cable.

They were towed helplessly along the wreck-pack's rim toward the *Martian Queen*. Once inside its airlock, Jandron's men removed the prisoners' space-helmets and then used the duplicate-control inside the airlock itself to open the inner door. Through this opening they thrust the captives, those inside the ship not daring to enter the airlock. Jandron's men then closed the inner door, re-opened the outer one, and started back toward the *Pallas* with the helmets of Kent and his companions.

Kent and the others soon found Crain and his half-dozen men who rapidly undid their bonds. Crain's men still wore their space-suits, but, like Kent's companions, were without space-helmets.

"Kent, I was afraid they'd get you and your men too!" Crain exclaimed. "It's all my fault, for when I saw Jandron and his men coming from the wreck-pack I never doubted but that it was you."

"It's no one's fault," Kent told him. "It's just something that we couldn't foresee."

CRAIN'S eyes fell on Krell. "But what's he doing here?" he exclaimed. Kent briefly explained Jandron's treachery toward Krell, and Crain's brows drew ominously together.

"So Jandron put you here with us! Krell, I am a commissioned captain of a space-ship, and as such can legally try you and sentence you to death here without further formalities."

Krell did not answer, but Kent intervened. "There's hardly time for that now, sir," he said. "I'm as anxious to settle with Krell as anyone, but right now our main enemy is Jandron, and Krell hates Jandron worse than we do, if I'm not mistaken."

"You're not," said Krell grimly. "All I want right now is to get within reach of Jandron."

"There's small chance of any of us doing that," Crain told them. "There's not a single space-helmet on the *Martian Queen*."

"You've searched?" Liggett asked.

"Every cubic inch of the ship," Crain told him. "No, Jandron's men made sure there were no helmets left here, and without helmets this ship is an inescapable prison."

"Damn it, there must be some way out!" Kent exclaimed. "Why, Jandron and his men must be starting to pump that fuel into the *Pallas* by now! They'll be sailing off as soon as they do it!"

Crain's face was sad. "I'm afraid this is the end, Kent. Without helmets, the space between the *Martian Queen* and the *Pallas* is a greater barrier to us than a mile-thick wall of steel. In this ship we'll stay, until the air and food give out, and death releases us."

"Damn it, I'm not thinking of myself!" Kent cried. "I'm thinking of Marta! The *Pallas* will sail out of here with her in Jandron's power!"

"The girl!" Liggett exclaimed. "If she could bring us over space-helmets from the *Pallas* we could get out of here!"

Kent was thoughtful. "If we could talk to her—she must still have that suit-phone I gave her. Where's another?"

CRAIN quickly detached the compact suit-phone from inside the neck of his own space-suit, and Kent rapidly tuned it to the one he had given Marta Mallen. His heart leapt as her voice came instantly from it:

"Rance! Rance Kent—"

"Marta—this is Rance!" he cried.

He heard a sob of relief. "I've been calling you for minutes! I was hoping that you'd remember to listen!

"Jandron and ten of the others have gone to that wreck in which you found the fuel," she added swiftly. "They unreeled a tube-line behind them as they went, and I can hear them pumping in the fuel now."

"Are the others guarding you?" Kent asked quickly.

"They're down in the lower deck at the tanks and airlocks. They won't allow me down on that deck. I'm up here in the middle-deck, absolutely alone.

"Jandron told me that we'd start out of here as soon as the fuel was in," she added, "and he and the men were laughing about Krell."

"Marta, could you in any way get space-helmets and get out to bring them over here to us?" Kent asked eagerly.

"There's a lot of space-suits and helmets here," she answered, "but I couldn't get out with them, Rance! I couldn't get to the airlocks with Jandron's seven or eight men down there guarding them!"

Kent felt despair; then as an idea suddenly flamed in him, he almost shouted into the instrument:

"Marta, unless you can get over here with helmets for us, we're all lost. I want you to put on a space-suit and helmet at once!"

THERE was a short silence, and then her voice came, a little muffled. "I've got the suit and helmet on, Rance. I'm wearing the suit-phone inside it."

"Good! Now, can you get up to the pilot-house? There's no one guarding it or the upper-deck? Hurry up there, then, at once."

Crain and the rest were staring at Kent. "Kent, what are you going to have her do?" Crain exclaimed. "It'll do no good for her to start the *Pallas:* those guards will be up there in a minute!"

"I'm not going to have her start the *Pallas*," said Kent grimly. "Marta, you're in the pilot-house? Do you see the heavy little steel door in the wall beside the instrument-panel?"

"I'm at it, but it's locked with a combination-lock," she said.

"The combination is 6-34-77-81," Kent told her swiftly. "Open it as quickly as you can."

"Good God, Kent!" cried Crain. "You're going to have her—?"

"Get out of there the only way she can!" Kent finished fiercely. "You have the door open, Marta?"

"Yes; there are six or seven control-wheels inside."

"Those wheels control the *Pallas'* exhaust-valves," Kent told her. "Each wheel opens the valves of one of the ship's decks or compartments and allows its air to escape into space. They're used for testing leaks in the different deck and compartment divisions. Marta, you must turn all those wheels as far as you can to the right."

"But all the ship's air will rush out; the guards below have no suits on, and they'll be—" she was exclaiming. Kent interrupted.

"It's the only chance for you, for all of us. Turn them!"

There was a moment of silence, and Kent was going to repeat the order when her voice came, lower in tone, a little strange:

"I understand, Rance. I'm going to turn them."

THERE was silence again, and Kent and the men grouped round him were tense. All were envisioning the same thing—the air rushing out of the *Pallas'* valves, and the unsuspecting guards in its lower deck smitten suddenly by an instantaneous death.

Then Marta's voice, almost a sob: "I turned them, Rance. The air puffed out all around me."

"Your space-suit is working all right?"

"Perfectly," she said.

"Then go down and tie together as many space-helmets as you can manage, get out of the airlock, and try to get over here to the *Martian Queen* with them. Do you think you can do that, Marta?"

"I'm going to try," she said steadily. "But I'll have to pass those men in the lower-deck I just—killed. Don't be anxious if I don't talk for a little."

Yet her voice came again almost immediately. "Rance, the pumping has stopped! They must have pumped all the fuel into the *Pallas!*"

"Then Jandron and the rest will be coming back to the *Pallas* at once!" Kent cried. "Hurry, Marta!"

The suit-phone was silent; and Kent and the rest, their faces closely pressed against the deck-windows, peered intently along the wreck-pack's edge. The *Pallas* was hidden from their view by the wrecks between, and there was no sign as yet of the girl.

Kent felt his heart beating rapidly. Crain and Liggett pressed beside him, the men around them; Krell's face was a mask as he too gazed. Kent was rapidly becoming convinced that some mischance had overtaken the girl when an exclamation came from Liggett. He pointed excitedly.

SHE was in sight, unrecognizable in space-suit and helmet, floating along the wreck-pack's edge toward them. A mass of the glassite space-helmets tied together was in her grasp. She climbed bravely over the stern of a projecting wreck and shot on toward the *Martian Queen.*

The airlock's door was open for her, and, when she was inside it, the outer door closed and air hissed into the lock. In a moment she was in among them, still clinging to the helmets. Kent grasped her swaying figure and removed her helmet.

"Marta, you're all right?" he cried. She nodded a little weakly.

"I'm all right. It was just that I had to go over those guards that were all frozen. . . . Terrible!"

"Get these helmets on!" Crain was crying. "There's a dozen of them, and twelve of us can stop Jandron's men if we get back in time!"

Kent and Liggett and the nearer of their men were swiftly donning the helmets. Krell grasped one and Crain sought to snatch it.

"Let that go! We'll not have you with us when we haven't enough helmets for our own men!"

"You'll have me or kill me here!" Krell cried, his eyes hate-mad. "I've got my own account to settle with Jandron!"

"Let him have it!" Liggett cried. "We've no time now to argue!"

Kent reached toward the girl. "Marta, give one of the men your helmet," he ordered; but she shook her head.

"I'm going with you!" Before Kent could dispute she had the helmet on again, and Crain was pushing them into the airlock. The nine or ten left inside without helmets hastily thrust steel bars into the men's hands before the inner door closed. The outer one opened and they leapt forth into space, floating smoothly along the wreck-pack's border with bars in their grasp, thirteen strong.

Kent found the slowness with which they floated forward torturing. He glimpsed Crain and Liggett ahead, Marta beside him, Krell floating behind him to the left. They reached the projecting freighters, climbed over and around them, braced against them and shot on. They sighted the *Pallas* ahead now. Suddenly they discerned another group of eleven figures in space-suits approaching it from the wreck-pack's interior, rolling up the tube-line that led from the *Pallas* as they did so. Jandron's party!

JANDRON and his men had seen them and were suddenly making greater efforts to reach the *Pallas*. Kent and his companions, propelling themselves frenziedly on from another wreck, reached the ship's side at the same time as Jandron's men. The two groups mixed and mingled, twisted and turned in a mad space-combat.

Kent had been grasped by one of Jandron's men and raised his bar to crack the other's glassite helmet. His opponent caught the bar, and they struggled, twisting and turning over and over far up in space amid a half-score similar struggles. Kent wrenched his bar free at last from the other's grasp and brought it down on his helmet. The glassite cracked, and he caught a glimpse of the man's hate-distorted face frozen instantly in death.

Kent released him and propelled himself toward a struggling trio nearby. As he floated toward them, he saw Jandron beyond them making wild gestures of command and saw Krell approaching Jandron with upraised bar. Kent, on reaching the three combatants, found them to be two of Jandron's men overcoming Crain. He shattered one's helmet as he reached them, but saw the other's bar go up for a blow.

Kent twisted frantically, uselessly, to escape it, but before the blow could descend a bar shattered his opponent's helmet from behind. As the man froze in instant death Kent saw that it was Marta who had struck him from behind. He jerked her to his side. The struggles in space around them seemed to be ending.

Six of Jandron's party had been slain, and three of Kent's companions. Jandron's four other followers were giving up the combat, floating off into the wreck-pack in clumsy, hasty flight. Someone grasped Kent's arm, and he turned to find it was Liggett.

"They're beaten!" Liggett's voice came to him. "They're all killed but those four!"

"What about Jandron himself?" Kent cried. Liggett pointed to two space-suited bodies twisting together in space, with bars still in their lifeless grasp.

Kent saw through their shattered helmets the stiffened faces of Jandron and Krell, their helmets having apparently been broken by each other's simultaneous blows.

Crain had gripped Kent's arm also. "Kent, it's over!" he was exclaiming. "Liggett and I will close the *Pallas*' exhaust-valves and release new air in it. You take over helmets for the rest of our men in the *Martian Queen*."

IN several minutes Kent was back with the men from the *Martian Queen*. The *Pallas* was ready, with Liggett in its pilot-house, the men taking their stations, and Crain and Marta awaiting Kent.

"We've enough fuel to take us out of the dead-area and to Neptune without trouble!" Crain declared. "But what about those four of Jandron's men that got away?"

"The best we can do is leave them here," Kent told him. "Best for them, too, for at Neptune they'd be executed, while they can live indefinitely in the wreck-pack."

"I've seen so many men killed on the *Martian Queen* and here," pleaded Marta. "Please don't take them to Neptune."

"All right, we'll leave them," Crain agreed, "though the scoundrels ought to meet justice." He hastened up to the pilot-house after Liggett.

In a moment came the familiar blast of the rocket-tubes, and the *P-11as* shot out cleanly from the wreck-pack's edge. A scattered cheer came from the crew. With gathering speed the ship arrowed out, its rocket-tubes blasting now in steady succession.

Kent, with his arm across Marta's shoulders, watched the wreck-pack grow smaller behind. It lay as when he first had seen it, a strange great mass, floating forever motionless among the brilliant stars. He felt the girl beside him shiver, and swung her quickly around.

"Let's not look back or remember now, Marta!" he said. "Let's look ahead."

She nestled closer inside his arm. "Yes, Rance. Let's look ahead."

TWO-WAY TIME

A NEW theory of time, which rejects the notion that yesterday preceded to-day in any absolute sense, reveals the possibility that events now occurring are among the factors that decided Caesar nearly 2,000 years ago to cross the Rubicon, and which questions the theory of the fourth dimension, was propounded recently by Dr. Gilbert N. Lewis, physicist, of the University of California.

The theory revolutionizes the hoary idea of cause and effect. It presents time as symmetrical, flowing in two directions. It pictures the present as not only "pushed into existence by the past" but also "pulled into existence by the future." It denies that the universe is running down to a lifeless and changeless end and poses the idea that the whole universe may sometime return exactly to its present condition.

Thus far, Dr. Lewis made it clear, he has found proof for his theory only in the field of physics. "But if one has the temerity to apply to the whole universe the laws that are now adopted in the little republic of physics," he said, "the entire conception of the sequence of time must be changed."

Outlining prohibitory laws in physics, such as the law against perpetual motion machines, upon which certain branches of the science have been built, he said:

"In this address I am going to discuss another such prohibition which has the widest implications in science and philosophy. This law states that in the domain of physical science one must never attempt to distinguish between past and future.

"It was the careful scrutiny of the meaning of time in physics that led to the principle of relativity, but in the work of Einstein and of Minkowski there remain a past and a future, and the picture of events jostled into a mysterious and passive future by an active past."

This concept of time moving only in one direction was introduced by Newton, yet in the Newtonian mechanics it has long been recognized that no more than a simple symmetrical time is needed, said Dr. Lewis.

"From existing astronomical data," he went on, "we may predict an eclipse 1,000 years hence, or calculate an eclipse of 1,000 years ago, both with equal accuracy. If we should construct a moving picture to represent the motions of the solar system, it would be just as satisfactory if it were run backwards, and the Newtonian laws would be equally well obeyed."

With this banishment of the idea of "one-way time," Dr. Lewis pointed out that the established idea that cause precedes effect must be abandoned. Cause and effect, he said, are not analogous to purpose and fulfillment but are part of a symmetrical pattern. Events are thus controlled not alone by the factors which come before but also by those which follow. If you decide to buy a new suit to-day, you will do so not simply because you noticed that your old one was shabby yesterday, but equally because you will want to wear it to-morrow."

For evidence to support his theory, Dr. Lewis said, while it is still the current view, some physicists have questioned the law of thermodynamics which implies that the universe is running down and will eventually become lifeless and changeless.

"Beginning with Williard Gibbs," he said, "there have been many who realized that just as a pack of cards, if indefinitely shuffled, will eventually return to its original arrangement so any physico-chemical system, when left to itself in any initial state, must return to that state."



"A little object lesson, as it were!"

The God in the Box

By Sewell Peaslee Wright

THIS is a story I never intended to tell. I would not even tell it now if it were not for the Zenians.

Understand that I do not dislike the Zenians. One of the best officers I ever had was a Zenian. His name was Eitel, and he served under me on the old *Tamon*, my first command. But lately the Zenians have made rather too much of the exploits of Ame Baove.

In the course of his Special Patrol duties, Commander John Hanson receives the unique and poignant mystery of "home sweet home."

The history of the Universe gives him credit, and justly, for making

the first successful exploration in space. Baove's log of that trip is a classic that every school-child knows.

But I have a number of friends who are natives of Zenia, and they fret me with their boastings.

"Well, Hanson," they say, "your Special Patrol Service has done wonderful work, largely under the officership of Earth-men. But after all, you have to admit that it was a Zenian who first mastered space!"

Perhaps it is just fractiousness of an old man, but countless repetitions of such statements, in one form or another, have irritated me to the point of action—and before going further, let me say, for the benefit of my Zenian friends, that if they care to dig deeply enough into the archives, somewhere they will find a brief report of these adventures recorded in the log of one of my old ships, the *Ertak*, now scrapped and forgotten. Except, perhaps, by some few like myself, who knew and loved her when she was one of the newest and finest ships of the Service.

I commanded the *Ertak* during practically her entire active life. Those were the days when John Hanson was not an old man, writing of brave deeds, but a youngster of half a century, or thereabouts, and full of spirit. Sometimes, when memory brings back those old days, it seems hard for me to believe that John Hanson, Commander of the *Ertak*, and old John Hanson, retired, and a spinner of ancient yarns, are one and the same—but I must get on to my story, for youth is impatient, and from "old man" to "old fool" is a short leap for a youthful mind.

THE Special Patrol Service is not all high adventure. It was not so even in the days of the *Ertak*. There was much routine patrolling, and the *Ertak* drew her full share of this type of duty. We hated it, of course, but in that Service you do what you are told and say nothing.

We were on a routine patrol, with only one possible source of interest in our orders. The wizened and sour-faced scientists the Universe acclaims so highly had figured out that a certain planet, thus far unvisited, would be passing close to the line of our patrol, and our orders read, "if feasible," to inspect this body, and if inhabited, which was doubted, to make contact.

There was a separate report, if I remember correctly, with a lot of figures. This world was not large; smaller than Earth, as a matter of fact, and its orbit brought it into conjunction with our system only once in some immemorable period of time. I suppose that record is stored away, too, if anybody is interested in it. It was largely composed of guesses, and most of them were wrong. These white-coated scientists do a lot of wild guessing, if the facts were known.

However, she did show up at about the place they had predicted. Kincaide, my second officer, was on duty when the television disk first picked her up, and he called me promptly.

"Strobus"—that was the name the scientists had given this planet we were to look over—"Strobus is in view, sir, if you'd like to look her over," he reported. "Not close enough yet to determine anything of interest, however, even with maximum power."

I considered for a moment, scowling at the microphone.

"Very well, Mr. Kincaide," I said at length. "Set a course for her. We'll give her a glance, anyway."

"Yes, sir," replied Kincaide promptly. One of the best officers in the Service, Kincaide. Level-headed, and a straight thinker. He

was a man for any emergency. I remember—but I've already told that story.

I TURNED back to my reports, and forgot all about this wandering Strobus. Then I turned in, to catch up somewhat on my sleep, for we had had some close calls in a field of meteors, and the memory of a previous disaster was still fresh in my mind.* I had spent my "watch below" in the navigating room, and now I needed sleep rather badly. If the scientists really want to do something for humanity, why don't they show us how to do without food and sleep?

When, refreshed and ready for anything, I did report to the navigating room, Correy, my first officer, was on duty.

"Good morning, sir," he nodded. It was the custom, on ships I commanded, for the officers to govern themselves by Earth standards of time; we created an artificial day and night, and disregarded entirely, except in our official records, the enar and other units of the Universal time system.

"Good morning, Mr. Correy. How are we bearing?"

"Straight for our objective, sir." He glanced down at the two glowing charts that pictured our surroundings in three dimensions, to reassure himself. "She's dead ahead, and looming up quite sizeably."

"Right!" I bent over the great hooded television disk—the ponderous type we used in those days—and picked up Strobus without difficulty. The body more than filled the disk and I reduced the magnification until I could get a full view of the entire exposed surface.

Strobus, it seemed, bore a slight resemblance to one view of my own Earth. There were two very apparent polar caps, and two continents, barely connected, the two of them resembling the numeral eight in the writing of Earth-men; a numeral consisting of two circles, one above the other, and just touching. One of the roughly circular continents was much larger than the other.

"Mr. Kincaide reported that the portions he inspected consisted entirely of fluid, sir," commented Correy. "The two continents now visible have just come into view, so I presume that there are no others, unless they are concealed by the polar caps. Do you find any indications of habitation?"

"I haven't examined her closely under high magnification," I replied. "There are some signs. . . ."

I INCREASED power, and began slowly searching the terrain of the distant body. I had not far to search before I found what I sought.

"We're in luck, Mr. Correy!" I exclaimed. "Our friend is inhabited. There is at least one sizeable city on the larger continent, and . . . yes, there's another! Something to break the monotony, eh? Strobus is an 'unknown' on the charts."

"Suppose we'll have trouble, sir?" asked Correy hopefully. Correy was a prime hand for a fight of any kind. A bit too hot-headed, perhaps, but a man who never knew when he was beaten.

"I hope not; you know how they rant at the Base when we have to protect ourselves," I replied, not without a certain amount of bitterness. "They'd like to pacify the Universe with never a sweep of a disintegrator beam. 'Of course, Commander Hanson' some silver-sleeve will say, 'if it was absolutely vital to protect your men and your ship'—ugh! They ought to turn out for a tour of duty once in a while, and see what conditions are." I was young, then, and the attitude of my conservative superiors at the Base

*See "The Outer World" in the April issue of Astounding Stories.—Ed

was not at all in keeping with my own views, at times.

"You think, then, that we will have trouble, sir?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," I shrugged. "The people of this Strobus know nothing of us. They will not know whether we come as friends or enemies. Naturally, they will be suspicious. It is hard to explain the use of the menore, to convey our thoughts to them."

I glanced up at the attraction meter, reflecting upon the estimated mass of the body we were approaching. By night we should be nearing her atmospheric envelope. By morning we should be setting down on her.

"We'll hope for the best, sir," said Correy innocently.

I bent more closely over the television disk, to hide my smile. I knew perfectly what the belligerent Correy meant by "the best."

THE next morning, at atmospheric speed, we settled down swiftly over the larger of the two continents, Correy giving orders to the navigating room while I divided my attention between the television disk and the altimeter, with a glance every few seconds at the surface temperature gauge. In unknown atmospheres, it is not difficult to run up a considerable surface temperature, and that is always uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous.

"The largest city seems to be nearer the other continent. You should be able to take over visually before long. Has the report on the atmosphere come through yet?"

"Not yet. Just a moment, sir." Correy spoke for a moment into his microphone, and turned to me with a smile.

"Suitable for breathing," he reported. "Slight excess of oxygen, and only a trace of moisture. Hendricks just completed the analysis." Hendricks, my third officer, was as clever as a laboratory man in many ways, and a red-blooded young officer as well. That's a combination you don't come across very often.

"Good! Breathing masks are a nuisance. I believe I'd reduce speed somewhat; she's warming up. The big city I mentioned is dead ahead. Set the *Ertak* down as close as possible."

"Yes, sir!" snapped Correy, and I leaned over the television disk to examine, at very close range, the great Strobian metropolis we were so swiftly approaching.

THE buildings were all tall, and constructed of a shining substance that I could not identify, even though I could now make out the details of their architecture, which was exceedingly simple, and devoid of ornament of any kind, save an occasional pilaster or flying buttress. The streets were broad, and laid out to cut the city into lozenge-shaped sections, instead of the conventional squares. In the center of the city stood a great lozenge-shaped building with a smooth, arched roof. From every section of the city, great swarms of people were flocking in the direction of the spot toward which the *Ertak* was settling, on foot and in long, slim vehicles of some kind that apparently carried several people.

"Lots of excitement down there, Mr. Correy," I commented. "Better tell Mr. Kincaide to order up all hands, and station a double guard at the port. Have a landing force, armed with atomic pistols and bombs, and equipped with menores, as an escort."

"And the disintegrator-ray generators—you'll have them in operation, sir, just in case?"

"That might be well. But they are not to be used except in the greatest

emergency, understand. Hendricks will accompany me, if it seems expeditious to leave the ship, leaving you in command here."

"Very well, sir!" I knew the arrangement didn't suit him, but he was too much the perfect officer to protest, even with a glance. And besides, at the moment, he was very busy with orders to the men in the control room, forward, as he conned the ship to the place he had selected to set her down.

But busy as he was, he did not forget the order to tune up the disintegrator-ray generators.

WHILE the great circular door of the *Ertak* was backing out ponderously from its threaded seat, suspended by its massive gimbals, I inspected the people of this new world.

My first impression was that they were a soldiery people, for there were no jostling crowds swarming around the ship, such as might have been expected. Instead, the citizenry stood at ease in a sort of military formation of numerous small companies, each apparently in charge of an officer. These companies were arranged to form a long wide avenue, leading to the city, and down this avenue a strange procession was coming toward the ship.

I should make it clear at this point that these Strobians were, in form, very similar to Earth-men, although somewhat shorter in stature, and certainly more delicately formed. Perhaps it would be better to say they resembled the Zenians, save for this marked difference: the Strobians were exceedingly light in color, their skins being nearly translucent, and their hair a light straw color. The darkest hair I saw at any time was a pale gold, and many had hair as colorless as silver—which I should explain is a metal of Earth somewhat resembling aluminum in appearance.

The procession was coming toward the ship slowly, the marchers apparently chanting as they came, for I could see their lips moving. They were dressed in short kirtles of brilliant colors—scarlet, green, orange, purple—and wore brilliant belts suspended about their waists by straps which crossed over their breasts and passed over each shoulder.

Each marcher bore a tall staff from which flew a tiny pennon of the same color as his chief garment. At the top of each staff was a metal ornament, which at first glance I took to be the representation of a fish. As they came closer, I saw that this was not a good guess, for the device was without a tail.

"THE exit port is open, sir," reported Hendricks. "The people seem far from hostile, and the air is very good. What are your orders?"

"There will be no change, I think," I said as I hurried toward the now open door. "Mr. Kincaide will be in command of the guard at the port. You and I, with a small landing force, will advance to meet this procession. Make sure that there are a number of extra menores carried by the escort; we shall need them."

"Yes, sir!" Hendricks snapped a command, and the landing force fell into place behind us as we passed through the circular doorway, and out onto the rocky ground of Strobus.

The procession stopped instantly, and the chanting died to a murmur. The men forming the living wall on each side bowed their heads and made a quick sign; a peculiar gesture, as though they reached out to shake an invisible hand.

The leader of the procession, a fine-featured man with golden hair, walked forward with bowed head.

chanting a single phrase over and over again in a voice as sweet as a woman's: "*Toma annerson . . . toma annerson . . . toma annerson. . . .*"

"Sounds friendly enough," I whispered to Hendricks "Hand me an extra menore; I'll see. . . ."

The chanting stopped, and the Strobian lifted his head.

"Greetings!" he said. "You are welcome here."

I THINK nothing ever surprised me more. I stared at the man like a fool, my jaw dropping, and my eyes bulging. For the man spoke in a language of Earth; spoke it haltingly and poorly, but recognizably.

"You—you speak English?" I faltered. "Where—where did you learn to speak this language?"

The Strobian smiled, his face shining as though he saw a vision.

"Toma annerson," he intoned gravely, and extended his right hand in a greeting which Earthmen have offered each other for untold centuries!

I shook hands with him gravely, wondering if I were dreaming.

"I thank you for your welcome," I said, gathering my wits at last. "We come as friends, from worlds not unlike your own. We are glad that you meet us as friends."

"It was so ordered. *He* ordered it so, and Artur is His mouthpiece in this day." The Strobian weighed every word carefully before he uttered it, speaking with a solemn gravity that was most impressive.

"Artur?" I questioned him. "That is your name?"

"That is my name," he said proudly "It came from He Who Speaks who gave it to my father many times removed."

There were many questions in my mind, but I could not be outdone in courtesy by this kindly Strobian.

"I am John Hanson," I told him, "Commander of the Special Patrol Service ship *Errak*. This is Avery Hendricks, my third officer."

"Much of that," said Artur slowly, "I do not understand. But I am greatly honored." He bowed again, first to me, and then to Hendricks, who was staring at me in utter amazement. "You will come with us now, to the Place?" Artur added.

I considered swiftly, and turned to Hendricks.

"This is too interesting to miss," I said in an undertone. "Send the escort back with word for Mr. Correy that these people are very friendly, and we are going on into the city. Let three men remain with us. We will keep in communication with the ship by menore."

HENDRICKS gave the necessary orders, and all our escort, save for three men, did a brisk about face and marched back to the ship. The five of us, conducted by Artur, started for the city, the rest of the procession falling in behind us. Behind the double file of the procession, the companies that had formed the living wall marched twenty abreast. Not all the companies, however, for perhaps a thousand men, in all, formed a great hollow square about the *Errak*, a great motionless guard of honor, clad in kirtles like the pennon-bearers in the procession, save that their kirtles were longer, and pale green in color The uniform of their officers was identical, save that it was somewhat darker in color, and set off with a narrow black belt, without shoulder straps.

We marched on and on, into the city, down the wide streets, walled with soaring buildings that shone with an iridescent lustre, toward the great domed building I had seen from the *Errak*.

The streets were utterly deserted, and when we came close to the

building I saw why. The whole populace was gathered there; they were drawn up around the building in orderly groups, with a great lane opened to the mighty entrance.

There were women waiting there, thousands of them, the most beautiful I have ever seen, and in my younger days I had eyes that were quick to note a pretty face.

Through these great silent ranks we passed majestically, and I felt very foolish and very much bewildered. Every head was bowed as though in reverence, and the chanting of the men behind us was like the singing of a hymn.

AT the head of the procession, we entered the great domed, lozenge-shaped building, and I stared around in amazement.

The structure was immense, but utterly without obstructing columns, the roof being supported by great arches buttressed to pilasters along the walls, and furnished with row after row of long benches of some polished, close-grained red wood, so clear that it shone brilliantly.

There were four great aisles, leading from the four angles of the lozenge, and many narrower ones, to give ready access to the benches, all radiating from a raised dais in the center, and the whole building illuminated by bluish globes of light that I recognized from descriptions and visits to scientific museums, as replicas of an early form of the ethon tube.

These things I took in at a glance. It was the object upon the huge central dais that caught and held my attention.

"Hendricks!" I muttered, just loud enough to make my voice audible above the solemn chanting. "Are we dreaming?"

"No, sir!" Hendricks' eyes were starting out of his head, and I have no doubt I looked as idiotic as he did. "It's there."

On the dais was a gleaming object perhaps sixty feet long—which is a length equal to the height of about ten full-sized men. It was shaped like an elongated egg—like the metal object surmounting the staffs of the pennon-bearers!

And, unmistakably, it was a ship for navigating space.

AS we came closer, I could make out details. The ship was made of some bluish, shining metal that I took to be chromium, or some compound of chromium, and there was a small circular port in the side presented to us. Set into the blunt nose of the ship was a ring of small disks, reddish in color, and deeply pitted, whether by electrical action or oxidization, I could not determine. Around the more pointed stern were innumerable small vents, pointed rearward, and smoothly stream-lined into the body. The body of the ship fairly glistened, but it was dented and deeply scratched in a number of places, and around the stern vents the metal was a dark, iridescent blue, as though stained by heat.

The chanting stopped as we reached the dais, and I turned to our guide. He motioned that Hendricks and I were to precede him up a narrow, curving ramp that led upwards, while the three Zenians who accompanied us were to remain below. I nodded my approval of this arrangement, and slowly we made our way to the top of the great platform, while the pennon-bearers formed a close circle around its base, and the people, who had surrounded the great building filed in with military precision and took seats. In the short space of time that it took us to reach the top of the dais, the whole great building filled itself with humanity.

Artur turned to that great sea of faces and made a sweeping gesture, as of benediction.

"Toma annerson!" His voice rang out like the clear note of a bell, filling that vast auditorium. In a great wave, the assembled people seated themselves, and sat watching us, silent and motionless.

ARTUR walked to the edge of the dais, and stood for a moment as though lost in thought. Then he spoke, not in the language which I understood, but in a melodious tongue which was utterly strange. His voice was grave and tender; he spoke with a degree of feeling which stirred me even though I understood no word that he spoke. Now and again I heard one recognizable sequence of syllables, that now familiar phrase, "toma annerson."

"Wonder what that means, sir?" whispered Hendricks. "'Toma annerson?' Something very special, from the way he brings it out. And do you know what we are here for, and what all this means?"

"No," I admitted. "I have some ideas, but they're too wild for utterance. We'll just go slow, and take things as they come."

As I spoke, Artur concluded his speech, and turned to us.

"John Hanson," he said softly, "our people would hear your voice."

"But—but what am I to say?" I stammered. "I don't speak their language."

"It will be enough," he muttered, "that they have heard your voice."

He stood aside, and there was nothing for me to do but walk to the edge of the platform, as he had done, and speak.

My own voice, in that hushed silence, frightened me. I would not have believed that so great a gathering could maintain such utter, deathly silence. I stammered like a school-child reciting for the first time before his class.

"People of Strobus," I said—this is as nearly as I remember it, and perhaps my actual words were even less intelligent—"we are glad to be here. The welcome accorded us overwhelms us. We have come . . . we have come from worlds like your own, and . . . and we have never seen a more beautiful one. Nor more kindly people. We like you, and we hope that you will like us. We won't be here long, anyway. I thank you!"

I WAS perspiring and red-faced by the time I finished, and I caught Hendricks in the very act of grinning at his commander's discomfiture. One black scowl wiped that grin off so quickly, however, that I thought I must have imagined it.

"How was that, Artur?" I asked. "All right?"

"Your words were good to hear, John Hanson," he nodded gravely. "In behalf—"

The hundreds of blue lights hung from the vaulted roof clacked suddenly and went out. Almost instantly they flashed on again—and then clicked out. A third time they left us momentarily in darkness, and, when they came on again, a murmur that was like a vast moan rose from the sea of humanity surrounding the dais. And the almost beautiful features of Artur were drawn and ghastly with pain.

"They come!" he whispered. "At this hour, they come!"

"Who, Artur?" I asked quickly. "Is there some danger?"

"Yes. A very great one. I will tell you, but first—" He strode to the edge of the dais and spoke crisply, his voice ringing out like the thin cry of military brass. The thousands in the auditorium rose in unison, and swept down the aisles toward the doors.

"Now," cried Artur, "I shall tell you the meaning of that signal. For three or four generations, we have awaited it with dread. Since

the last anniversary of his coming, we have known the time was not far off. And it had to come at this moment! But this tells you nothing.

"THE signal warns us that the Neens have at last made good their threat to come down upon us with their great hordes. The Neens were once men like ourselves, who would have none of Him"—and Artur glanced toward the gleaming ship upon the dais—"nor His teachings. They did not like the new order, and they wandered off, to join those outcasts who had broken His laws, and had been sent to the smaller land of this world, where it is always warm, and where there are great trees thick with moss, and the earth underfoot steams, and brings forth wriggling life. Neen, we call that land, as this larger land is called Liber.

"These men of Neen became the enemies of Libar, and of us who call ourselves Libars, and follow His ways. In that warm country they became brown, and their hair darkened. They increased more rapidly than did the Libars, and as they forgot their learning, their bodies developed in strength.

"Yet they have always envied us; envied us the beauty of our women, and of our cities. Envied us those things which He taught us to make, and which their clumsy hands cannot fashion, and which their brutish brains do not understand.

"And now they have the overwhelming strength that makes us powerless against them." His voice broke, he turned his face away, that I might not see the agony written there.

"Toma annerson!" he muttered. "Ah, toma annerson!" The words were like a prayer.

"Just a minute, Artur!" I said sharply. "What weapons have they? And what means of travel?"

He turned with a hopeless gesture.

"They have the weapons we have," he said. "Spears and knives and short spears shot from bows. And for travel they have vast numbers of monocars they have stolen from us, generation after generation."

"Monocars?" I asked, startled.

"Yes. He Who Speaks gave us that secret. Ah, He was wise; to hear His voice was to feel in touch with all the wisdom of all the air!" He made a gesture as though to include the whole universe.

THERE were a score of questions in my mind, but there was no time for them then. I snatched my menore from its clip on my belt, and adjusted it quickly. It was a huge and cumbersome thing, the menore of that day, but it worked as well as the fragile, bejeweled things of today. Maybe better. The guard posted outside the ship responded instantly.

"Commander Hanson emanating," I shot at him. "Present my compliments to Mr. Correy, and instruct him as follows: He is to withdraw the outside guard instantly, and proceed with the *Ertak* to the large domed building in the center of the city. He will bring the *Ertak* to rest at the lowest possible altitude above the building, and receive further orders at that time. Repeat these instructions."

The guard returned the orders almost word for word, and I removed the menore with a little flourish. Oh, I was young enough in those days!

"Don't worry any more, Artur," I said crisply. "I don't know who *He* was, but we'll show you some tricks you haven't seen yet! Come!"

I led the way down the ramp, Hendricks, Artur, and the three Zenians following. As we came out into the daylight, a silent shadow fell across the great avenue that

ran before the entrance, and there, barely clearing the shining roof of the auditorium, was the sleek, fat bulk of the *Ertak*. Correy had wasted no time in obeying orders.

Correy could smell a fight further than any man I ever knew.

FROM her emergency landing trap, the *Ertak* let down the cable elevator, and the six of us, Hendricks, Artur, the three Zenians of the crew, and myself, were shot up into the hull. Correy was right there by the trap to greet me.

"What are the orders, sir?" he asked, staring curiously at Artur. "Is there trouble brewing?"

"I gather that there is, but we'll talk about that in a moment—in the navigating room." I introduced Artur and Correy as we hurried forward, and as soon as the door of the navigating room had closed on the three of us, I turned to Artur with a question.

"Now, where will we find the enemy, these Neens? Have you any idea?"

"Surely," nodded Artur. "They come from their own country, to the south. The frontier is the narrow strip of land that connects Libar with Neen, and since the alarm has been sounded, the enemy is already at the frontier, and the forces of my people and the enemy are already met."

"I don't know anything about the set-up," put in Correy, "but that sounds like poor management to me. Haven't you any advance guards, or spies, or outposts?"

Artur shook his head sadly.

"My people are not warlike. We who spread His teachings have tried to warn the masses, but they would not listen. The land of the Neens was far away. The Neens had never risen against the Libars. They never would. So my people reasoned."

"And you think there is fighting in progress now?" I asked. "How did the word come?"

"By phone or radio, I presume," said Artur. "We are in communication with the frontier by both methods, and the signal of the lights has been arranged for generations. In the day, all lights were to flash on three times; at night, they were to be darkened three times."

SO they had telephones and radios! It was most amazing, but my questions could wait. They would have to wait. Correy was shuffling his feet with anxiety for orders to start action.

"All right, Mr. Correy," I said. "Close the ports and ascend to a height that will enable you to navigate visually. You are sufficiently familiar with the country to understand our objective?"

"Yes, sir! Studied it coming down. It's that neck of land that separates the two continents." He picked up the microphone, and started punching buttons and snapping orders. In twenty seconds we were rushing, at maximum atmospheric speed, toward the scene of what, Artur had told us, was already a battle.

Artur proved to be correct. As we settled down over the narrow neck of land, we could see the two forces locked in frenzied combat; the Libars fighting with fine military precision, in regular companies, but outnumbered at least five to one by the mob-like masses of brown Neens.

From the north and from the south slim, long vehicles that moved with uncanny swiftness were rushing up reserve forces for both sides. There were far more monocars serving the Libars, but each car brought but a pitifully few men. And every car shot back loaded with wounded.

"I thought you said your people

weren't fighters, Artur?" I said. "They're fighting now, like trained soldiers."

"Surely. They are well trained, but they have no fighting spirit, like the enemy. Their training, it is no more than a form of amusement, a recreation, the following of custom. He taught it, and my people drill, knowing not for what they train. See! Their beautiful ranks crumple and go down before the formless rush of the Neens!"

"The disintegrator beams, sir?" asked Correy insidiously.

"No, That would be needless slaughter. Those brown hordes are witless savages. An atomic bomb, Mr. Correy. Perhaps two of them, one on either flank of the enemy. Will you give the order?"

CORREY rapped out the order, and the ship darted to the desired position for the first bomb—darted so violently that Artur was almost thrown off his feet.

"Watch!" I said, motioning to Artur to share a port with me.

The bomb fled downward, a swift black speck. It struck perhaps a half mile to the west (to adopt Earth measures and directions) of the enemy's flank.

As it struck, a circle of white shot out from the point of impact, a circle that barely touched that seething west flank. The circle paled to gray, and settled to earth. Where there had been green, rank growth, there was now no more than a dirty red crater, and the whole west flank of the enemy was fleeing wildly.

I said the whole west flank; that was not true. There were some that did not flee; that would never move again. But there was not one hundredth part of the number that would not have dissolved into dust with one sweep of the disintegrator ray through that pack of striving humanity.

"The other flank, Mr. Correy," I said quietly. "And just a shade further away from the enemy. A little object lesson, as it were!"

THE battle was at a momentary standstill. The Neens and the Libars seemed, for the moment, to forget the issue; every face was turned upward. Even the faces of the runners who fled from a disaster they did not understand.

"I think one more will be enough, sir," chuckled Correy. "The beggars are ready to run for it right now." He gave a command, and as though the microphone itself released the bomb, it dropped from the bottom of the *Ertak* and diminished swiftly as it hurtled earthward.

Again the swift spread of white that turned to gray; again the vast red crater. Again, too, a flank crumpled.

As though I could see the faces of the brown men, I saw terror strike to the heart of the Neens. The flanks were melting away, and the panic of fear spread as flame spreads on a surface of oil. Correy has a good eye for such things, and he said there were fifty thousand of the enemy massed there. If there were, in the space that it takes the heart to tick ten times, fifty thousand Neens turned their back to the enemy and fled to the safety of their own jungles.

THE Libars made no effort to pursue. They stood there, in their military formations, watching with wonderment. Then, with crisp military dispatch, they maneuvered into great long ranks, awaiting the arrival of transportation.

"And so it is finished, John Hanson," said Artur slowly, his eyes shining with a light that might almost be called holy. "My people are saved! He spoke well, as always, when He said that those who would come after Him would be

our friends if we were their friends."

"We are your friends," I replied, "but tell me, who is this one of whom you speak always, but do not name? From what I have seen, I guess a great deal, but there has been no time to learn all the story. Will you tell me, now?"

"I will, if that is your wish," said Artur, "but I should prefer to tell you in the Place. It is a long story, the story of toma annerson, the story of He Who Speaks, and there are things you should see, so that you may understand that story."

"As you wish, Artur." I glanced at Correy and nodded. "Back to the city, Mr. Correy. I think we're through here."

"I believe we are, sir." He gave the orders to the operating room, and the *Ertak* swung in a great circle toward the gleaming city of the Libars. "It looked like a real row when we got here; I wouldn't have minded being down there for a few minutes myself."

"With the *Ertak* poised over your head, dropping atomic bombs?"

Correy shook his head and grinned.

"No, sir!" he admitted. "Just hand to hand, with clubs."

ARTUR and I were together in the great domed building he called "the Place." There were no others in that vast auditorium, although outside a multitude waited. Artur had expressed a wish that no one accompany me, and I could see no valid reason for refusing the request.

"First," he said, pausing beside the great shining body of the space ship upon the central dais, "let me take you back many generations, to the time when only this northern continent was inhabited, and the Libars and the Neens were one people.

"In those days, we were of less understanding than the Neens of today. There were no cities; each family lived to itself, in crude huts, tilling the ground and hunting its own food. Then, out of the sky came this." He touched, reverently, the smooth side of the space ship. "It came to earth at this very spot, and from it, presently, emerged He Who Speaks. Would you inspect the ship that brought Him here?"

"Gladly," I said, and as I spoke, Artur swung open the small circular door. A great ethon flashlight, of a type still to be seen in our larger museums, stood just inside the threshold, and aided by its beams, we entered.

I stared around in amazement. The port through which he had entered led to a narrow compartment running lengthwise of the ship: a compartment twice the length of a man, perhaps, and half the length of a man in breadth. The rest of the ship was cut off by bulkheads, each studded with control devices the uses of which I could but vaguely understand.

FORWARD was a veritable maze of instruments, mounted on three large panels, the central panel of the group containing a circular lens which apparently was the eyepiece of some type of television disk the like of which I have never seen or heard. From my hasty examination I gathered that the ship operated by both a rocket effect (an early type of propulsion which was abandoned as ineffective) and some form of attraction-repulsion apparatus, evidently functioning through the reddish, pitted disks I had observed around the nose of the ship. The lettering upon the control panels and the instruments, while nearly obliterated, was unmistakably in the same language in which Artur had addressed us.

The ship had, beyond the shadow of doubt, come from Earth!

"Artur," I said gravely, "you have shown me that which has stirred me more than anything in my life. This ship of the air came from my own world, which is called Earth."

"True," he nodded, "that is the name He gave to it: Earth. He was a young man, but He was full of kindness and wisdom. He took my people out of the fields and the forests, and He taught them the working of metals, and the making of such things as He thought were good. Other things, of which He knew, He kept secret. He had small instruments He could hold in His hand, and which roared suddenly, that would take the life of large animals at a great distance, but He did not explain these, saying that they were bad. But all the good things He made for my people, and showed them how to make others.

"NOT all my people were good. Some of them hated this great one, and strove against Him. They were makers of trouble, and He sent them to the southern continent, which is called Neen. Those among my people who loved Him and served Him best, He made His friends. He taught them His language, which is this that I speak, and which has been the holy language of His priests since that day. He gave to these friends names from his own country, and they were handed down from father to son, so that I am now Artur, as my father was Artur, and his father before him, for many generations."

"Just a second," I put in. "Artur? That is not—ah! Arthur! That is the name: Arthur."

"Perhaps so," nodded the priest of this unknown Earth-child. "In many generations, a name might slightly change. But I must hasten on with my story, for outside my people become impatient.

"In the course of time, He passed away, an old man, with a beard that was whiter than the hair of our new-born children. Here, our hair grows dark with age, but His whitened like the metal of his ship that brought Him here. But He left to us His voice, and so long as His voice spoke to us on the anniversary of the day upon which He came out of the sky, the Neens believed that His power still protected His people.

"But the Neens were only awaiting the time when His voice would no longer sound in the Place. Each year their brown and savage representatives came, upon the anniversary, to listen, and each time they cowered and went back to their own kind with the word that He Who Speaks, still spoke to His people.

"But the last anniversary, no sound came forth. His voice was silenced at last; and the Neens went back rejoicing, to tell their people that at last the god of the Libars had truly died, and that His voice sounded no more in the Place."

A TENSE excitement gripped me; my hands trembled, and my voice, as I spoke to Artur, shook with emotion.

"And this voice—it came from where, Artur?" I whispered.

"From here." Sorrowfully, reverently, he lifted, from a niche in the wall, a small box of smooth, shining metal, and lifted the lid.

Curiously, I stared at the instruments revealed. In one end of the horizontal panel was a small metal membrane, which I guessed was a diaphragm. In the center of the remaining space was thrust up a heavy pole of rusty metal. Supported by tiny brackets in such fashion that it did not quite touch the pole of rusty metal, was a bright wire, which disappeared through tiny holes in the panel, on either side. Each of the brackets which supported the wire was tipped with

a tiny roller, which led me to believe that the wire was of greater length than was revealed, and designed to be drawn over the upright piece of metal.

"Until the last anniversary," said Artur sadly, "when one touched this small bit of metal, here,"—he indicated a lever beside the diaphragm, which I had not noted—"this wire moved swiftly, and His voice came forth. But this anniversary, the wire did not move, and there was no voice."

"Let me see that thing a moment." There were hinges at one end of the panel, and I lifted it carefully. An intricate maze of delicate mechanism came up with it.

ONE thing I saw at a glance: the box contained a tiny, crude, but workable atomic generator. And I had been right about the wire: there was a great orderly coil of it on one spool, and the other end was attached to an empty spool. The upright of rusty metal was the pole of an electro-magnet, energized by the atomic generator.

"I think I see the trouble, Artur!" I exclaimed. One of the connections to the atomic generator was badly corroded: a portion of the metal had been entirely eaten away, probably by the electrolytic action of the two dissimilar metals. With trembling fingers I made a fresh connection, and swung down the hinged panel. "This is the lever?" I asked.

"Yes; you touch it so." Artur moved the bit of metal, and instantly the shining wire started to move, coming up through the one small hole, passing, on its rollered guides, directly over the magnet, and disappearing through the other hole, to be wound up on the take-up spool. For an instant there was no sound, save the slight grinding of the wire on its rollers, and then a bass, powerful voice spoke from the vibrating metal diaphragm:

"I am Thomas Anderson," said the voice. "I am a native of a world called Earth, and I have come through space to this other sphere. I leave this record, which I trust is imperishable, so that when others come to follow me, they may know that to Earth belongs the honor, if honor it be, of sending to this world its first visitor from the stars.

"There is no record on Earth of me nor of my ship of space, the *Adventurer*. The history of science is a history of men working under the stinging lash of criticism and scoffing; I would have none of that.

"THE *Adventurer* was assembled far from the cities, in a lone place where none came to scoff or criticize. When it was finished, I took my place and sealed the port by which I had entered. The *Adventurer* spurned the Earth beneath its cradles, and in the middle of the Twenty-second century, as time is computed on Earth, man first found himself in outer space.

"I landed here by chance. My ship had shot its bolt. Perhaps I could leave, but the navigation of space is a perilous thing, and I could not be sure of singling out my native Earth. This is a happy world, and the work I am doing here is good work. Here I remain.

"And now, to you who shall hear this, my voice, in some year so far away that my bones shall be less than dust, and the mind refuses to compute the years, let me give into your charge the happiness and the welfare of these, my people. May peace and happiness be your portion. That is the wish of Earth's first orphan, Thomas Anderson."

There was a click, and then the sharp hum of the wire re-spooling itself on the original drum.

"Toma annerson," said Artur solemnly: "He Who Speaks." He

offered his hand to me, and I understood, as I shook hands gravely, that this old Earth greeting had become a holy sign among these people. And I understood also the meaning of the familiar phrase, "toma annerson"; it was the time-corrupted version of that name they held holy—the name of Thomas Anderson, child of my own Earth, and explorer of space centuries before Ame Baove saw his first sun.

THERE is more I could tell of Strobus and its people, but an old man's pen grows weary.

The menace of the Neens, Artur agreed, had been settled forever. They knew now that He Who Speaks still watched over the welfare of his people. The Neens were an ignorant and a superstitious people, and the two great craters made by our atomic bombs would be grim reminders to them for many generations to come.

"You have done all that need be done, John Hanson," said Artur, his face alight with gratitude. "And now you must receive the gratitude of my people!" Before I could protest, he signalled to the men who guarded the four great entrances, and my words were lost in the instant tramp of thousands of feet marching down the broad aisles.

When they were all seated, Artur spoke to them, not in the "holy" language I understood, but in their own common tongue. I stood there by the ship, feeling like a fool, wondering what he was saying. In the end he turned to me, and motioned for me to join him, where he stood near the edge of the dais. As I did so, every person in that monstrous auditorium rose and bowed his head.

"They greet you as the successor to He Who Speaks," said Artur gently. "They are a simple folk, and you have served them well. You are a man of many duties that must soon carry you away, but first will you tell these people that you are their friend, as Toma Annerson was the friend of their fathers?"

FOR the second time that day I made a speech.

"Friends," I said, "I have heard the voice of a great countryman of mine, who is dead these countless centuries, and yet who lives today in your hearts. I am proud that the same star gave us birth." It wasn't much of a speech, but they didn't understand it, anyway. Artur translated it for them, and I think he embroidered it somewhat, for the translation took a long time.

"They worship you as the successor to Toma Annerson," whispered Artur as the people filed from the great auditorium. "Your fame here will be second only to His, for you saved, to-day, the people He called His own."

We left just as darkness was falling, and as I shot up to the hovering *Ertak*, the chant of Artur and his bright-robed fellows was the last sound of Strobus that fell upon my ears. They were intoning the praises of Thomas Anderson, man of Earth.

And so, my good Zenian friends, you learn of the first man to brave the dangers of outer space. He left no classic journal behind him as did Ame Baove, nor did he return to tell of the wonders he had found.

But he did take strong root where he fell in his clumsy craft, and if this record, supported only by the log of the *Ertak*, needs further proof, some five or six full generations from now Strobus will be close enough for doubting Zenians to visit. And they will find there, I have no least doubt, the enshrined *Adventurer*, and the memory, not only of Thomas Anderson, but of one, John Hanson, Commander (now retired) of the Special Patrol Service.

The Readers' Corner



A Meeting Place for Readers of Astounding Stories

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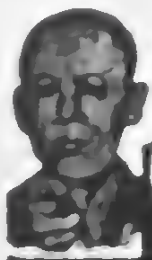
Twenty months ago the Clayton Magazines, with the birth of Astounding Stories, inaugurated a new era in the serial literature of Science Fiction. As we proudly announced at that time, no expense was to be spared in securing the best of such stories obtainable and attracting the greatest writers now living. Always since then we have adhered to our policy of securing the finest stories to be had—as scores of thousands of our loyal "associate editors" know so well.

But, fantastic fiction is of two main types, Science Fiction and Weird Fiction—and all this time we were covering only the first-mentioned half of its natural field. Hundreds of thousands of potential Readers of Weird Fiction lacked a magazine that in kind and quality was a true companion to Astounding Stories.

So, many months ago, in response to this crying public need, we set about laying plans and gathering material—and now, at last, the Science Fiction of Astounding Stories has been given its logical companion, the Weird Fiction of Strange Tales.

We know you'll like it no end. You have always been instantly responsive to offerings of quality, and few lovers of Science Fiction draw the arbitrary line between super-science and the supernatural so fine that they will not also enjoy the choice Weird Fiction we have obtained.

You'll meet many old friends in Strange Tales. We have already bought stories by such world famous writers of fantasy as Ray Cummings, Charles Willard Diffin, Francis Flagg, Arthur J. Burks, Capt. S. P. Meek, Paul Ernst, S. B. H. Hurst,



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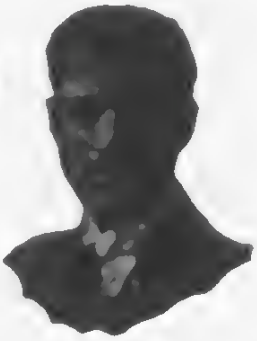
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Gordon MacCreagh, Edmond Hamilton, Victor Rousseau and many others. In sympathy with the idea of a companion magazine, Strange Tales will in make-up be a twin to your well-liked Astounding Stories. It has the same Editor. And Wesso is doing the covers.

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(Thrifty Readers will take advantage of the Special Subscription Offer to be found in the front of this issue.)

—The Editor.

Why Should It?

Dear Editor:

I just can't get it through my head why some of those Readers have so much to say against A. S. I don't think that I have ever read a story in it that did not have its good points. As for the Authors, the three best are: Ray Cummings, R. F. Starzl and Harl Vincent by a long shot! My favorite stories are the interplanetary and time-traveling kind. I also like those about atomic universes.

The best stories in the June issue were: "The Man from 2071," "Holocaust" and "Manape the Mighty." Those who want reprints give me a pain. Why should the same story be printed twice in the same magazine?

Here's wishing you the best of luck.—Howard Barrickion, 421 West Maple Ave., Adrian, Mich.

From a "Regular"

Dear Editor:

Many of your Readers have complained that there is not enough science in your stories. Some like a lot of science, others less. Possibly these Readers who complain don't know that there are magazines to please both sides. Astounding Stories publishes stories that lean more towards the action side. Other Science Fiction magazines want more science. Let those who want less science read Astounding Stories and those who want more science read the others. I like both types and I buy every Science Fiction magazine published.

The covers have never come off of my copies of Astounding Stories.

You ought to get hold of stories by David H. Keller, M. D. Doctor Keller is a good writer, and a popular one, too.

"Manape the Mighty" is a mighty good story. One doesn't wonder though, when he sees that the author is Arthur J. Burks. More power to you, Mr. Burks.

In "The Exile of Time" we are carried into the future and into the past. Who wouldn't be thrilled!

A story of future warfare by C. W. Diffin, a John Hanson story, by S. P. Wright, and a science-adventure story by R. F. Starzl all helped to make the June issue a most astounding number.

The cover picture was excellent. I'd like to see a cover showing some super-mechanism once in a while. A little variety is always good.

In Paul and Wesso you have the two best Science Fiction artists.

Is there any chance of giving a Dr. Bird story a cover picture? The John Hanson stories deserve one also.—Jack Darrow, 4225 N. Spaulding Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Another Convert

Dear Editor:

A few months ago I happened to pick up a copy of Astounding Stories, and nothing has ever given me a better hour's entertainment than the stories contained therein. I am now a regular Reader of A. S. and indeed feel sure that it is the best American mag that comes into this country.

Some of the stories I enjoyed most were: "Monsters of Mars," the John Hanson series, "The World Behind the Moon," "The Second Satellite" and "The Silver Dome." Ray Cummings, S. P. Wright and Murray Leinster are the last thing in writing stories. Give us more of them.

The book itself is just the right size; the paper good; and the pictures, especially the cover, are great, but its neatness is spoiled by the rough edges. Can you remedy that? [Yessir, we have!—Ed.]

Well, I guess I'll make room for some other guy who belongs to your little country. So long.—Cyril Tiplin, 32 Moorland Road, Cardiff, South Wales, Great Britain.

Slams—for Others

Dear Editor:

Up until now I have been a silent but satisfied reader, but I can remain so no longer.

Your stories are good, the science contained in them, for the most part, is true, and while I don't want a story that is a scientific treatise, I do like something that approaches true science. As a rule, your stories give me this. But cut all scientific basis out and you have a good fairy tale, nothing more. Don't change your size or your paper for it is good. In fact you have the best magazine in the Science Fiction market, bar none.

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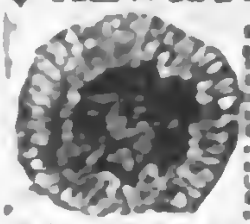
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but at a few of your Readers. Why on earth must they continually write in and kick about this and that? After all, you're running this show and not they. And, too, certain Readers simply must write in and display their ideas in regard to the human soul; simply must find some way of getting rid of it or reducing it to a few elements. They reduce it to its component parts and find it bunk and a few other words not mentioned in polite society, or at least scarcely appropriate. Thank heaven I can still believe in a God, a human soul, etc., and at the same time hold synthetic life to be possible, evolution to be possible, and, still not discarding the Bible (not necessarily taking it literally, however), hold the nebular evolution of the galaxies to be true and many other such things in science. This is not meant as a tirade against the religion of any of these men, but merely a sort of opposite view or something similar. Science and religion should not conflict if both are clearly understood. But enough of this.

Gertrude Hemken has the right idea. Must all invaders from other planets be hostile? She is the first one to bring this up, and shows that at least a few Readers have the desire to be friendly. She is about the best critic you have in "The Readers' Corner" now.

Wouldn't it be terrible if someone succeeded in finding a way of concentrating the cosmic rays, say, five hundred times? Just imagine one person with all that power in his hands. Mankind in the hollow of his hand; a lever or two pressed and a whole army reduced to seared flesh, blackened, and broken stumps of humanity. I shudder to think of it. But I suppose it will come.

I would like to hear from anyone, boys or girls in any part of the country, who are interested in Science Fiction.—John Conboy, 615 "B" Ave., Lawton, Okla.

But—the Bones Shrank, Too!

Dear Editor:

I wish to point out another error in Ray Cummings' "Beyond the Vanishing Point." Someone—I just forget who—pointed out that the bones of the body would not shrink but would pierce the flesh. I agree with that person. I noticed that the characters were fully clothed when they shrank. Now, the drug would just act on the tissues of the body; when they shrank they would be smothered in their clothes and would not be able to reach the nugget. Nevertheless, it was a good story.

Why not put out a quarterly in addition to Astounding Stories, and call it Astounding Stories Quarterly? You could have it 2½ or 2 times the size of the monthly and charge fifty cents for it.

Also, have a department that gives a picture of the authors and short biographies.

And now for the stories. The three best in each issue were: April: "Monsters of Mars," "The Exile of Time," and "The World Behind the Moon." May: "The Exile of Time," "Dark Moon," "The Death Cloud." June: "Manape the Mighty," "Holocaust," and "The Man from 2071."

Why not try and get some stories by Burroughs, Kline, Merritt, Verrill, Keller and other popular writers? "The Exile of Time," by Cummings, promises to be almost as good as "Brigands of the Moon."—Oswald Train, Box 94, Barnesboro, Pa.

A Hope Fulfilled

Dear Editor:

Astounding Stories always has an enthusiastic reception in our home, but this month you published a story that is so unusually good that I am writing to tell you how much we like it. In fact, if nominations are in order for the best story so far in Astounding Stories, we should like to suggest "Holocaust," by Diffin.

All his stories are vivid, the kind of story that youth loves, that fills their mind with dreams; and it is through such dreams that the unbelievable has been accomplished. It is good to be taken away from the sordid into realms unexplored. There are four boys in this home; you can readily understand my interest.

We are delighted Readers of "Dark Moon," and hope Mr. Diffin will let us know what happened next to Chet, Walt and Diane. They seem like very real people to us, so much so that we are hoping Chet will find romance as well as adventure.

We wish all success to Astounding Stories, and think that you are to be congratulated on securing such a splendid array of talented contributors.—Louise Dimaline, Belknap at Ashby, San Antonio, Tex.

Alas! Alas!

Dear Editor:

I agree with J. Vernon Shea, Jr. Your authors are the best in the field, but it seems they reserve the poorest product from their pens for Astounding Stories. I was amazed that my old favorite, Ray Cummings, produced as poor a story as "Jetta of the Lowlands." His "Beyond the Vanishing Point" was a poor carbon copy of his immortal "Golden Atom" stories. And so it goes.

Yes, by all means publish reprints.—J. Wasso, Jr., Pen Argyl, Pa.

Can't Think. I'm Dazed

Dear Editor:

Thank you most kindly for giving us straight edges. They sure are an improvement. Now we Readers have one item less to put into our letters.

It seems that all the surprises came in the same issue. An illustration by Paul

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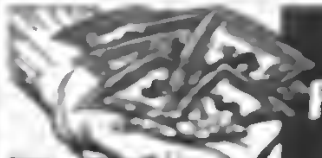
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What an improvement! See if you can't have three or four illustrations by him in every issue.

I take back what I said in my last missive about Wesso being your best artist. Now that Paul has come, Wesso looks like small change. Nevertheless Wesso is good, but not as good as Paul.

Now, with your kind permission, I will start in with another one of my time-traveling brainstorms.

If I were to miraculously come into possession of one of the villainous Mr. Tugh's time machines this is what I'd do:

Borrow about a hundred dollars, travel with it into the year 2000 and stop for a while. After about an hour I'd go up ten years and return to the place I had just been to. Therefore I would meet myself—and give myself the same hundred dollars to add to the hundred I had when I was at that moment. Thus I'd have two hundred dollars, when I only started out with one hundred. But wait! Think of this: If at the time I stopped and started I had two hundred dollars since I myself had given it to me, I would have two hundred dollars to give myself, so therefore I'd have four hundred dollars. And if I had four hundred dollars to give myself I'd have eight hundred. If I had eight to double I'd have sixteen. But this could go on forever until the poor old time-machine wouldn't hold any more paradoxical money.

Needless to say, I'd be rich! And as soon as I had unloaded one load I could go back for more. As every time I would get a load it would double what I already had. In three or four years of continuous work, imagine poor old Uncle Sam when I try to redeem all these bills! There wouldn't be enough gold in the world to do it! Then I'd have to use gold in doubling my money.

Now, in a great many stories interplanetary travel is an everyday affair, but if time-traveling got to be an everyday affair imagine the poor banks! Put one dollar into the bank at 4% interest semi-annually; go up about three thousand years and withdraw that dollar from the bank. In interest you'd have about as much money as there was on this planet. Also, you could go back and teach yourself certain things which you had learned when you were teaching yourself. Now then, where in blazes did you learn anything in the first place if you told yourself and no one told you? Talk about a self-made man.

No sir, time-traveling may be possible and makes a neat little story, but chaos would be the reward to this world if it tried to commercialize it. What do you think?—Jim Nicholson, 40 Lunado Way, San Francisco, Cal.

Why "On the Sly"?

Dear Editor:

I am writing to defend us women. I think Jim Nicholson is all wet about women objecting to Astounding Stories. Personally, I like them very much. Perhaps many of us do not like people to think we like them and read them on the sly.

I liked "Manape the Mighty," by Arthur J. Burks, who by the way is my favorite author.

I wish certain people I could name would cook a radish and keep their troubles to themselves. I'll bet Mr. W. H. Flowers is a bachelor, or he wouldn't want love left out. I think it helps in understanding human nature. I agree with Dave Diamond; I would like a little co-operation between the planets.

I think Wesso is marvelous. He makes the illustrations look realistic.

The only objection to the stories is that there are not enough of them.—Ethelwyn Morehouse, 964 Highland St., Columbus, Ohio.

Another "Manape" Admirer

Dear Editor:

I just had to write and tell you what a thrill "Manape the Mighty" gave me.

It just seemed as if it were *I* inside that darned ape-skin trying in agonizing ways to tell Ellen that the body hadn't an ape's mind.

Ray Cummings is to be complimented upon his story, "Beyond the Vanishing Point." It was absolutely the best atom-life yarn I have ever read.

Please keep the magazine the size it now is. It is very convenient to keep, as it isn't bulky and big.

I want to tell you what perfectly grand covers you have. Wesso (and don't let him out of your sight) drew a most wonderfully life-like drawing of "Manape the Mighty." This cover was excellent. His best cover to date. I think was "Beyond the Vanishing Point."—Marianne Ferguson, 20 So. Buffum St., Worcester, Mass.

On the Button

Dear Editor:

"Brickbats and plenty are coming, but not your way," says Arthur Mann. I just hope he reads this. What does he think this magazine is, anyway—a first grade reader? If he doesn't like science why doesn't he read detective magazines?

Let's cut out the fairy tales and have stories. Get this down to a Science Fiction mag.

Now that that's over I would like to congratulate A. J. Burks on his last story, "Manape the Mighty." It was swell, even if it wasn't the type of story I expected in this mag.

The May issue has so far had the best stories I've read. Glad to see that the magazine is improving every month. Keep up the good work.—M. R. Allen, Larchmont, N. Y.

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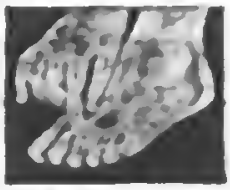
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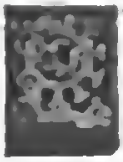
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"More Girls . . . Than Boys"

Dear Editor:

I have been reading Astounding Stories for many months, and I have enjoyed almost every story immensely.

A great many men and boys seem to think that girls do not care for science magazines, but they are wrong. Almost all of my high school girl friends read Astounding Stories, or other Science Fiction magazines; in fact, more girls read them here than boys. We may not be brilliant in scientific works, but we know enough about it to appreciate the fine stories in Astounding Stories.

If someone who sees this letter wishes to write to me, I will answer their letter promptly.—Virginia E. McCay, 134 W. Main St., Copperhill, Tenn.

An Announcement

Dear Editor:

May I announce that the Boys' Scientification Club has been dissolved and the Junior Scientific Association has taken its place. The aim of our organization is to encourage more youths to devote their lives to the advancement of science. This is accomplished by creating, in them, an interest in science by encouraging the reading of Science Fiction, and keeping this interest alive by holding various scientific contests and keeping them abreast with the latest scientific developments.

Write to the Secretary, Stockton Shaw, 169 Lunado Way, San Francisco, Cal., for membership, providing you are between the ages of 9 and 18 years.

We have an advisory member department for adults who are interested in our work and are willing to give us advice. Among these members are many prominent writers of Science Fiction.

Every month we issue two bulletins. One of them is The Telescope, which contains news, announcements and articles on the club, as well as stories, sometimes by professional authors, and a monthly bulletin called The Rocket in which is news about the progress in interplanetary travel as well as stories on the same.

We have a library of some 3000 magazines, both scientific and Science Fiction; also quite a number of such books. Our library is located at the president's house, and members may obtain books at all times.

The dues are only 10c per month or $1.00 per year, and we are sure that all those who join will not regret it.—Jim Nicholson, Headquarters, 40 Lunado Way, San Francisco, Cal.

Objection Sustained

Dear Editor:

Having read your "Readers' Corner" with great interest, I feel inspired to add my say-so. To me the Readers' reactions to the stories are almost as interesting as the stories themselves.

In "The Man from 2071," Wright's Mark Twainian twist to the situation where Commander Hanson is able to foretell the failure of the stranger's wild plans to conquer the earth, makes an interesting story. But as a woman, I would like to protest his begrudging our sex a chance to improve in a few thousand years. Granted, we often ask "utterly asinine questions" now around machinery, but must we still, two thousand years from now?

Charles W. Diffin's "Holocaust" is a dandy story: fine writing and interesting character work as well as imaginative. Let's have more like it.—S. B. Paddock, Dahlgren, Va.

"The Readers' Corner"

All readers are extended a sincere and cordial invitation to "come over in 'The Readers' Corner'" and join in our monthly discussion of stories, authors, scientific principles and possibilities—everything that's of common interest in connection with our Astounding Stories.

Although from time to time the Editor may make a comment or so, this is a department primarily for *Readers*, and we want you to make full use of it. Likes, dislikes, criticisms, explanations, roses, brickbats, suggestions — everything's welcome here; so "come over in 'The Readers' Corner'" and discuss it with all of us!

—*The Editor.*

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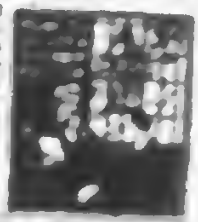
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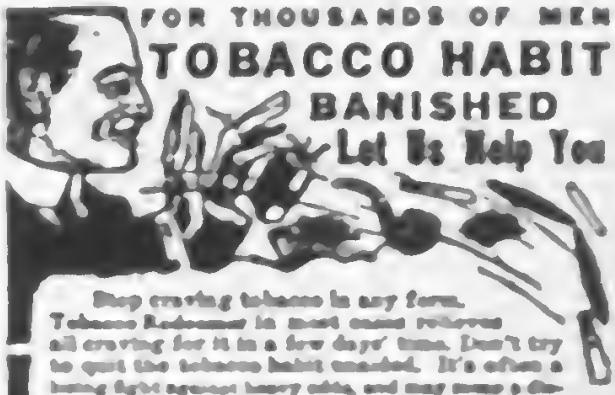
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